

**Sermon: December 4, 2016 – Advent II. Isaiah 11: 1-10**  
**Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev. Greg Wooley**

One of the open debates back in our seminary days, was the nature of this season we call Advent. While I recall Advent, back in my home congregation as nothing more than a gradual warm-up to Christmas, there was at seminary a real push to separate the celebrations of Christmas – when we focus on the birth of Jesus, the incarnation of God in human form – from Advent, a season of preparation in which we anticipate the second coming of Christ.

While this was a new idea to me, it is far from a new notion in the Church. The season of Advent has been marked since at least the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD, and the wondering about the thematic core of Advent dates to at least the 12<sup>th</sup> century AD, when a French Abbot named Bernard of Clairvaux spoke of three different “comings” of Christ for which we prepare in Advent: Christ’s coming in the flesh at Bethlehem, Christ’s coming into our hearts daily, and Christ’s coming in glory at the end of time.

So... how might we see today’s reading from the 11<sup>th</sup> chapter of Isaiah guiding us into these three types of preparation?

**CHRIST’S COMING IN THE FLESH AT BETHLEHEM**

It is reasonably safe to say that Isaiah did not have Jesus in mind when he wrote his words of the renewal of the Royal Line of David. His nation was in the midst of truly awful times, with a combination of foreign powers muscling in, and feeble, faithless leaders who bore little resemblance to the glorious leaders of old.

He used a tremendous visual image: a magnificent tree that had been chopped down to a stump. One could tell from the size of the stump and the number of rings, what a marvelous tree this must have been but now, this cruel reminder of past glory was all that remained. Imagine wandering through a forest that had been clear-cut, and envisioning the glory of what had been compared with the decimation of what remains, and you’ll get the picture of how disheartened the people had become.

Or maybe the people surrounding Isaiah had stopped being disheartened, and were ready to challenge the external forces ruining their lives: bring to mind the Dakota Access Pipeline protestors, who are at this moment doing everything in their power to make sure that the water supply and tribal lands are not jeopardized in the pursuit of the almighty dollar. Rather than being downcast about a feeling that “someone else” holds all the power, these protestors are turning their anger into action, unwilling to see land and water compromised by external interests.

My sense is that it is that kind of frustration into which Isaiah writes his words about the sad state of the stump of Jesse, the once-mighty trunk and branches that had led Israel in better days. With a mixture of sorrow and aggravation he looks at this stump – and then looks more closely. Look – just there – a tender shoot, tentative new growth emerging from the old foundation.

Chances are very good that Isaiah was envisioning that this renewal of Israel’s fortune would happen soon – if not in his lifetime, within the foreseeable future – rather than someone as far-off as Jesus, who did not arrive for nearly 800 years. Having said that, it is fully legitimate for Christians to hear Isaiah’s words of future hope and say, “hey, I recognize that guy,” for the qualities called for by Isaiah were very much fulfilled by Jesus. Isaiah foretold one who would demonstrate understanding, wise counsel, respect for God, and courageous effectiveness in countering the unjust: concern for the poor and no fear in the face of their oppressors. In short, Isaiah named the characteristics of a Messiah who would revive the royal line of Jesse, and Christians proclaim Jesus of Nazareth to be that Messiah.

That being the case, it makes perfect sense to read this passage from Isaiah in these weeks leading up to Christmas. We proclaim Jesus as Messiah, as the connection between his life and these hopes, is strong. But what about that other theology of the season of Advent – a time of anticipation for the second coming of Christ?

**CHRIST’S COMING IN GLORY AT THE END OF TIME**

I must admit that the second coming is not one of my top favourite preaching topics. It’s partly because of the weirdness of the version of end times as presented in the book of Revelation, but it’s also because I can do absolutely nothing about it, and I would rather spend my days engaging those places where I can

at least make *some* impact. If the Serenity Prayer is correct, and my task as a human is to accept the things I cannot change, change the things I can, and pray for wisdom to discern the difference, the timing of the second coming is definitely in the category of “things I cannot change.”

And, admittedly, within a denomination on the liberal end of the spectrum, the notion that Christ will someday be returning in the role of judge, is a bit jarring. We spend so much of our time and energy trying to break down the walls of judgmentalism, that it is hard to get too excited about the notion that the same Jesus who leads us to break down the walls, will someday pronounce judgment over all of it.

Yet even within our United Church Creed, are these words: ““We are called to be the Church... to proclaim Jesus, crucified and risen, our judge and our hope.” Much as we would like everything to be free and easy and lovey-dovey all the time, it is important for us to know that we are accountable. Each time we hear the call of Christ and clearly choose to go a different direction, we say a resounding NO to the life-giving force of the universe. Because of the forgiving grace of Jesus Christ, we do have hope of a new day and fresh opportunities, but make no mistake about it, us humans will be ultimately and finally held to account for our actions. “Jesus, crucified and risen, our judge and our hope.”

If we need evidence that Isaiah chapter 11 is referring, not just to an earthly ruler who is going to be really, really well-liked, but to this ultimate realm beyond our imagining, a place of cosmic change and holy reckoning, we need look no further than the words of verses six through eight, which are as other-worldly as they are lovely:

*“A wolf will reside with a lamb, and a leopard will lie down with a young goat; an ox and a young lion will graze together, as a small child leads them along. A cow and a bear will graze together, their young will lie down together. A lion, like an ox, will eat straw. A baby will play over the hole of a snake; over the nest of a serpent an infant will put his hand. They will no longer injure or destroy on my entire royal mountain.”*

Seminary Professor Fred Gaiser, commenting on this passage asks the obvious question: “Can this be more than a fairy tale? Cows and bears grazing together? Wolves and lambs, leopards and [goats], children and snakes??” Professor Gaiser then sets this answer to his question: “The Bible is not naïve; it knows full well the pain inherent in the created order: even when that order is working as it should, [some animals are predators and some are prey. Isaiah’s vision of a peaceable Kingdom, then] will come only beyond history as we know it. God keeps showing us a world of peace where rulers and people care for one another, for the poor and the needy, for the creation and all its creatures.... It is a vision of a [new] creation that sings God’s praise because all are fed and all are loved”.

Isaiah takes those instincts that are most natural in our world – the instinct of a wolf to devour a lamb, for example – and says that God’s new age is so completely different from the current one, that even these things will be inverted. For us, as Christians, we see this transformation as something already inaugurated through Jesus, friend of the poor and oppressed, our judge and our hope. Whether we truly perceive that as “good news” or not, depends on how we’re living our lives.

### **CHRIST’S COMING INTO MY HEART, DAILY**

The thing that both of these eras have in common, the era that started with a birth in Bethlehem and the future era of final days, is that they are completely initiated by God. We look back to the manger and ask ourselves, “do I believe that the love of God took a giant step forward at that moment?” We look forward to Christ’s promised return and ask ourselves, “do I trust that God’s intention for the world is that kind of peaceable kingdom?” In between those two God-events, is today – this moment – in which we ask ourselves, “what is my responsibility to God’s unfolding agenda? What difference can I make?”

At any given moment, it is important for us to take seriously God’s deep desire that all the world have health, happiness, freedom, prosperity, which we sum up in the Hebrew term, “Shalom”. As we survey the life of Christ, we see what love looks like when lived out in its fullness; as we listen to Isaiah’s hopes for the future, we see the grand possibilities of peace. With these two bookends, it really isn’t all that hard to see what the call is on my life: to live a life that is consistent with the goals of Shalom, to be attentive to the opportunities God gives me each day to be motivated by love and generosity rather than fear and self-centeredness. Or to turn it into a question, if an action or attitude would have no place in the new realm, how could I possibly justify living that way now? In the example of Jesus Christ, we see the

promise for a future where the last shall be first and the first shall be last, where the poor and the meek and the peacemakers will be lifted up; how can any person of faith see that and choose the opposite? As Martin Luther King Jr and others have said, “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice” – THAT flow of holy energy, is to guide our choices and set our intentions.

But what difference do my actions as an individual, or our actions as a Church or as a town make in the grand scheme of things? While I have heard it argued that since God controls the whole agenda, it really doesn't make any difference *what* we do, I am more drawn to the evidence that is provided by the “holy moments” in my life.

The Celts spoke of “thin places,” where the distance between heaven and earth is very, very small, and all of us have experiences in which the very love of God has touched our lives. Maybe it was at the birth of a child, or a moment of unexpected generosity, or safe deliverance from a frightening situation, or the magnificence of creation opening in front of you on a mountain trail. Each of us have had moments where God's love has been real to a whole new level, but those moments of awe do not shut us down, they inspire us. When my life is touched by love, I have no choice but to express gratitude to God and generosity to my neighbour. The work of sharing love is not something that we sit back and watch God do, it is the task of our lives. We are, indeed, the hands and feet and voice of Christ in this world, and every word and deed of love and mercy expresses our confidence that the good news of Jesus Christ becomes even better news when it is shared.

And so we do, in this season of Advent, invite Christ into our lives, this moment and every moment. We share Isaiah's hope for real, political, earthly change that will make life easier for the downtrodden, and see the beginnings of that in Jesus of Nazareth. We set our compass by the far-off horizon line, of a realm where the whole concept of predator and prey is no more, where safeguards against danger have no further role, a realm that welcomes back Jesus the Messiah. Prepare your hearts, my friends, for all these ways that Christ arrives. Amen.

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