

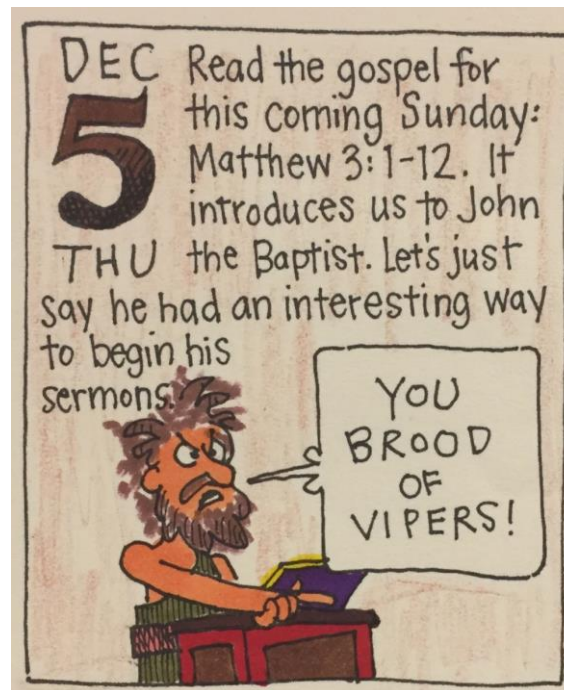
The Second Sunday of Advent  
December 8, 2019  
The Rev. Jedediah D. Holdorph  
Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend

Isaiah 11:1-10  
Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19  
Romans 15:4-13  
Matthew 3:1-12

“You brood of vipers!”

You know, I’m only quoting the Bible. And yet it doesn’t feel like an auspicious beginning to a sermon, does it.

That didn’t stop John the Baptist. The Advent Calendar that a number of you have taken home to color day by day featured that observation this past Friday. Looking ahead then to this morning, we were advised that John “had an interesting way to begin his sermons.”<sup>i</sup>



It all begs the question of whether you’d prefer John the Baptist this morning or Isaiah.

I’d guess most of us would prefer Isaiah. Isaiah’s words are filled with poetry and with promise. He seems more refined, a fine complement to the season of Advent, it seems. The images capture our hearts. The poetry fires our imaginations.

You could almost pick a verse at random and it would make for a better way to begin a sermon than anything John the Baptist has to say. Isaiah talks about growth, biological and spiritual – and both toward the same emergence of wisdom and understanding. Isaiah paints a picture of creation made new again, where all God’s creatures coexist peaceably in love and harmony.

And yet, even so, Isaiah does throw in a discordant note or two along the way. Isaiah speaks of the Chosen One, the Messiah, the one who ...

*... with righteousness [God's chosen] shall judge the poor,  
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;*

But then, in the very next breath it all goes a bit sideways:

*he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,  
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.*

A word of judgment that is, if anything, more harsh than anything said by John the Baptist.

And whatever good might come of Isaiah's vision, it comes only after violence. Notice that the "shoot that shall come from the stump of Jesse" grows from a stump. If there's any hope for Israel, it's that there's still some life in the roots below ground. John speaks ominously of an ax lying at the root of the trees; Isaiah speaks of a tree already chopped down.

The allure of Isaiah's vision of that peaceable kingdom only works because it so strikingly describes a world we do NOT live in. In place of the real world where "might makes right," Isaiah imagines a world where the right will always prevail, where the poor never go without, where the weak are more than food.

The images are beautiful in theory, but hard to take seriously in the real world. We've all seen nature shows. Some animals are predators. Some are prey. I'm reminded of an old "Far Side" cartoon:



It's possible to *imagine* a world where predators and prey lie comfortably together. It's possible to *imagine* a world without carnivores – where wolf and lamb, leopard and goat, calf and lion, cow and bear, lion and ox all live together ... eating straw and grazing on grass.

It's possible to *imagine* such a world. It's just well-nigh *impossible* for us to take it seriously. No parent would leave a child to play anywhere near the hole of an asp. No parent would allow their child to put a hand into an adder's den. A parent might *imagine* it, but don't do it!

Isaiah, of course, is not offering a lesson in “alternative wildlife relations”; he's spelling out a critique of society. His vision judges a world that fails to keep the most vulnerable among us safe and secure. Just as there are places we would never leave a child alone in the natural world, there are countless unsafe places in the so-called civilized world. And that's just not right.

And so Isaiah paints a picture, hoping to inspire us to imagine a radically better world than the one we know. He intends for us to yearn for it beyond all that we have any reason to expect.

And maybe God will make it happen someday. (That's what we proclaim in Advent.) Maybe God will make it happen someday, but in the meantime, what are we to do? And that's a question that takes us right to John the Baptist. John the Baptist's preaching is not so very different. He preaches toward the same goal as Isaiah did before him. He's just way more direct and explicit about what it will cost us.

He longs for judgment on all that is wrong with the world we know, and calls for the kind of repentance that makes a new world possible.

Judgment is a recurring theme in Matthew. Not unique to Matthew, perhaps, but a point of emphasis. And since we'll be reading a lot from Matthew over the course of the coming year, we'd do well to take a little care about our definitions. Lots of people are stuck with a caricature of judgment: an escalator you either go up or an escalator you go down. If you go up, you end up with a harp on a cloud; if you go down, you end up burning in Hell in the basement.

But judgment, at least from God's perspective, isn't primarily about punishment or retribution. It's about truth-telling. God's desire is for the truth to be known. And that's what prophets do. Whether an Old Testament prophet like Isaiah or a New Testament prophet like John the Baptist, they're mouthpieces for all that is holy, telling the truth about all that is unholy in this world.

The truth may be good news for you to hear; it may be bad. Sometimes it might mean a call to look at the people you've hurt; sometimes it might mean God saying, “I see the people who hurt you.” Either way is hard. Both are painful. And both seek healing.

Judgment starts with God saying, “I'm going to call out all the lies. I'm going to open up all the unfairness.” It ends with God saying, “Now let's talk about what a new society looks like.”<sup>ii</sup>

And that's how John so readily pivots from judgment to repentance. But again, we should be careful how we hear that word. Repentance is not primarily feeling guilty about what we've done and/or admitting our sins. Repentance is much more about aligning ourselves to that new society imagined by God, whether we think in terms of the "kingdom of heaven" (as John declares it) or in terms of the "peaceable kingdom" (as Isaiah imagines it).

Which is why I think John the Baptist is much more like Isaiah than not. I don't necessarily hear him yelling with a tone of dread and doom, but with a voice intense and full of hope. "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near" is less a threat of impending condemnation for wrongs we've done in the past, and much more an invitation to live into God's dream.

"True repentance," Frederick Buechner once wrote, "spends less time looking at the past and saying, 'I'm sorry,'" than to the future and saying, 'Wow!'"<sup>iii</sup>

John the Baptist and Isaiah the Prophet. I was going to say they're just opposite sides of the same coin, but that's not quite right. They're both different aspects of the same side. Their message is the same. They both point to the astounding, almost unimaginable, dream of God for us and all creation. They both call on us to respond and begin to find our way there.

They're singing the same song. With Isaiah, we sing, "Let there be peace on earth ..." And with John the Baptist, we conclude the refrain, "... and let it begin with me!"

And maybe therein lies a hint at what we might yet do this season of Advent. Let's dream a bit. Let's dream beyond what we can presently see to a world we can scarcely imagine.

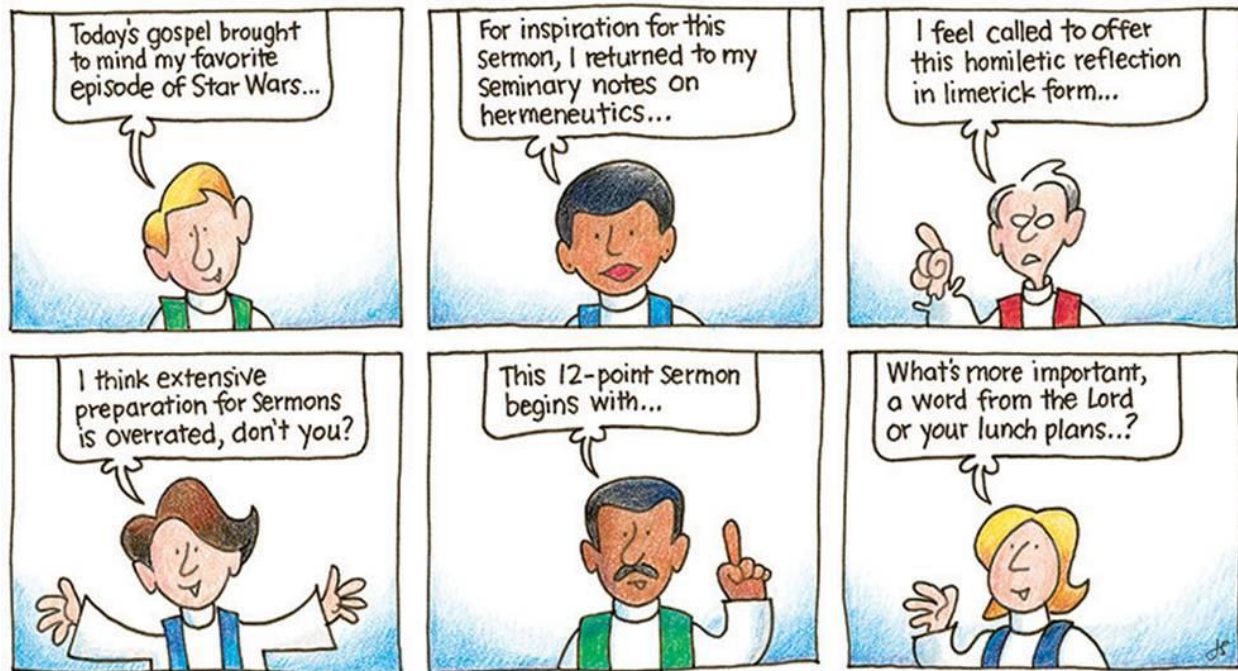
For God dreams of a different world where there is no predator or prey, no fear or hatred. We cannot usher it in. That's too much for any of us. (And it's not our job in any event.) But the dream of God is given to help us get our bearings.

Take a moment to imagine what God's vision would be ... for you, for our world.

And then choose one – just one – element of your life of which you'd like to repent. I'm not asking you to feel bad about something you have done or left undone. I'm inviting you to change direction in just one particular. Is there an unhealthy relationship you'd like to repair? Is there another way you'd like to spend your time and toward a better end? Is there some practice or habit you might take up that would produce a more abundant life for you or those around you?

It's all well and good to *hope* for that new society, to *long* for that peaceable kingdom to come, to *pray* for God's will to be done here on earth, to *wish* for all to be made whole again, to *watch* for the signs of God's every dream to come true for us, but if the things we do don't MAKE for peace and equity for all, then it's time for us to "repent." And so fulfill John the Baptist's call to "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

<sup>i</sup> For other less than auspicious sermon beginnings, I offer this old cartoon by Jay Sidebotham (a former colleague of mine when I lived in the Chicago area, the same cartoonist of our Advent Calendars):



OPENING LINES OF SERMONS WE DIDN'T STAY AROUND TO HEAR.

<sup>ii</sup> My observations here follow some helpful commentary on "judgment" by either Rolf Jacobson or Matt Skinner in the Sermon Brainwave podcast for December 8, 2019 @ [http://www.workingpreacher.org/brainwave.aspx?podcast\\_id=1201](http://www.workingpreacher.org/brainwave.aspx?podcast_id=1201).

<sup>iii</sup> Frederick Buechner, "Repentance," in *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1973), p. 79.