

12/8/13 2nd Sunday in Advent Isaiah 11:1-10 Matthew 3:1-12

Isn't the first reading from the prophet Isaiah wonderful? "A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots." This is talking about the restoration of Israel when it seems like all is lost. The passage goes on with the wolf shall lie down with the lamb, and the cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together. A little child shall lead them.

It is wonderful, sweet, pastoral. We get warm feelings and wish and hope the world could be that way. In the best of our religious desires we long for God to bring about this state of tranquility and peace in the world. And I think, if we are honest with ourselves, we are all working hard to make this a reality. We want there to be peace - especially this time of year. We want things to be good. We want everyone to be happy and to be content. Turning this vision into reality is what the holidays should be about.

And then I read the gospel reading. Wild man - nut case - crazy John the Baptist gets his say: "You brood of vipers! Who

warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham." Isn't that just a lovely message for a Christmas card!

Unfortunately John's words are the ones we need to hear if we are ever going to get to Christmas. Exactly who was John calling a brood of vipers? The Pharisees and Sadducees. That these two groups are in league with each other is amazing. There appear to be five major political/religious groups or parties in Judaism in Jesus' day. The Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Herodians, the Essenes, and the Zealots. We usually only encounter the Pharisees and Sadducees in the Bible. It's easy to look down upon them as the devils in the Bible, but we shouldn't. Unfortunately the Pharisees and the Sadducees were mostly educated middle and upper middle class people who were working hard to be righteous, do good, and bring about the kind of peace and tranquility the prophet Isaiah spoke about. In other words, the drives and motives of their lives looked an awful lot like our own.

John the Baptist was executed before Jesus was executed so he never knew what happened to him, but if he did I have a feeling he would come among us today and say something like:

“So, you’re hard working wise people who are trying to be good and help the poor. That’s sweet. That’s nice. But really? How hard are you actually trying? Don’t presume to say, ‘There are a lot of social pressures that make it hard to be a Christian.’ Or, ‘I don’t want my kids to miss out on opportunities because of church things.’ I tell you God can raise up more faithful people than you from the fiber of this carpet.

“You think you actually are giving and generous do you? Remember this, when Jesus was executed for you he died painfully, shamefully, and alone. He gave you 100%. How much do you give?”

John the Baptist would say to us, “What percentage of your income do you give? If you’re like most people you give a couple percent. On judgment day do you really think you can look your crucified lord and savior in the eye and say with confidence, ‘I gave 2 and a half percent of my salary?’ Oh, you

tithers out there. That's nice. So you're prepared to proudly proclaim to your lord, 'I gave 10%.'

Big deal. Are you really prepared to go to the judge of your life and give all the petty excuses about why you failed him? Bear fruit that shows you really care!

Bear fruit that shows you're really committed!

Take a chance! He did for you.

Really repent. Really change - don't just do lip service to your beliefs and then drop them when the going gets inconvenient for you."

You see, John the Baptist wasn't a nice guy. It's hard to hear the truth sometimes. If you ever want to realize just how we gloss over things in our lives in the name of politeness just visit a mental institution sometime. There you'll get the honest truth.

When I was doing my clinical pastoral education work at the University of Tennessee Medical Center I had to work in a mental hospital for a couple days. One guy sees me walk into the room.

He comes right up to my face, squints and stares at me, and proclaims, "Your nose is too big!"

Shocked and taken aback I stammered something like, "Thank you. I'm glad to know that."

The brutal truth hurts. John the Baptist wasn't afraid to say it. You know his story. He literally loses his head over it when he told the truth to the wrong people.

You see, we need John's truth telling as we come into Christmas. Without him we get a very messed up idea into our minds. We, like the Pharisees and Sadducees, diligently work to bring Isaiah's vision to life. Within the bounds of convenience we are extra nice, extra giving, extra sweet this time of year. It is as if we think that if we are nice around Christmas that maybe that niceness will last into the rest of the year.

John the Baptist will tell us that you can't earn your way to Christmas. There's no such thing as doing it right. There's no such thing as having the holiday season be so good and so

well organized that you can come to the manger on Christmas Eve and say, "Oh, what a sweet story of angels and shepherds and a newborn baby."

John would have us coming on our knees, just like the shepherds and wise men, and desperately pleading, "I'm sorry. I'm ever so sorry. Little baby Jesus please have mercy on me. Guide me onward."

The vision of peace and tranquility throughout the earth in Isaiah is talking about God's work. Try as we might, we'll never achieve it. In as much as we are successful we just proudly pat ourselves on the back for a job we think was well done.

John's way would be to remind us that God is the actor. And so then, when we come to the manger, not with self-righteous hearts because of our good deeds, but with the desperate pleading of hopeless brokenness we can fully receive the gift.

Christmas is a season of joy! It is a joy that does not come from us. It is a joy that comes from God. Because while the baby Jesus wasn't making theological proclamations from the manger we know his message, and it is the opposite of John's.

The message from the manger is, "Yes, I know you have failed, and failed miserably. I know you don't begin to deserve what you are going to receive. But I'm going to give you myself anyway."

Let the brutal truth of John's words sink into your lives so that you can be open to the true forgiveness from our Lord.
Amen