

Related to Peace

A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC, Lexington

Rev. Reebee Kavich Girash

December 4, 2022

Texts:

Isaiah 11:1-10

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,  
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.

**2**

The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him,  
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,  
the spirit of counsel and might,  
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.

**3**

His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.

He shall not judge by what his eyes see  
or decide by what his ears hear,

**4**

but with righteousness he shall judge for the poor  
and decide with equity for the oppressed of the earth;  
he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,  
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.

**5**

Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist  
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.

**6**

The wolf shall live with the lamb;

the leopard shall lie down with the kid;

the calf and the lion will feed together,

and a little child shall lead them.

**7**

The cow and the bear shall graze;

their young shall lie down together;

and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.

**8**

The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,

and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.

**9**

They will not hurt or destroy

on all my holy mountain,

for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord

as the waters cover the sea.

**10** On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious.

Matthew 3:1-12

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, **2** "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." **3** This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said,

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord;

make his paths straight.’ ”

**4** Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. **5** Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region around the Jordan were going out to him, **6** and they were baptized by him in the River Jordan, confessing their sins.

**7** But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for his baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? **8** Therefore, bear fruit worthy of repentance, **9** and 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. **10** Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

**11** “I baptize you with water for repentance, but the one who is coming after me is more powerful than I, and I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. **12** His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

## Sermon

Most of us have a relative who makes us nervous every holiday. Which strange sweater will they wear and will it smell like camel? How complicated is their diet this year? What outlandish thing will they say that will stop the conversation?

You might think that’s John the Baptist in the gospels - the cousin you hope declines your invitation.

However, wacky Cousin John was actually full of good news.

Jesus and John probably grew up pretty close to one another. To hear Luke tell it, their moms were relatives - close enough they spent their pregnancies together. John and Jesus were born within months of each other, close by to one another, both under amazing circumstances. They were cousins, more or less.

Maybe they spent lots of time together as children - spent the winters together - went to prayer services led by John's dad, the priest Zechariah; learned a little something about carpentry together in Joseph's shop.

They watched as everything happening to the Jewish community in that time unfolded - knew things were not right.

The nature of their births would mean they felt called to do something about it.

John's parents heard this prophecy:

"for he will be great in the sight of the Lord...even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. **17** With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before.... to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

And angels told the story of Jesus' birth, the Messiah, our savior.

I wonder if the young cousins sat together under a sycamore tree, planning. Where should we go, who will listen to us? How do we give people hope, push back against empire, give folks a vision?

How could we make it so no one will hurt or destroy anything on God's holy mountain?

What did Elizabeth and Mary think, watching from a distance?

These two wouldn't have moved on to the next trend when they grew up. The people needed them. Perhaps John could see Jesus growing in power, "[increasing] in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor." (Luke 2)

My guess is that at some point, John said to Jesus, listen - cousin - you've got the vision. You've got the power. But I'm sick of waiting. I'm going. Right now. I'm going to go warm up the crowd for you.

Jesus grew in wisdom, and John grew in....wildness? Locusts and honey, wilderness wanderings and standing in muddy water yelling at folk!

Shawnthea Moore says that, "John the Baptist is significant because he is the last in the line of prophets. Although he does not call himself one, John is the embodiment of the whole tradition. He is dressed like Elijah, he sounds like Isaiah, and he is standing in the

water that marked the boundary between the wilderness and the Promised Land. In this way John provides a kind of continuity; he is the bridge with the prophetic tradition.”<sup>1</sup>

Cousin Jesus, on the other hand, we *imagine* being a little more patient, a little more calm, a little wiser. We talked about this last week - Jesus’ practices for inner peace.

Jesus, I imagine, has to this point been apprenticing with his father in the carpentry shop, praying, studying, going to synagogue. Getting into just enough trouble to keep his parents guessing, like that time when he was twelve when he disappeared and they found him in the temple.

And John is out there, prophesying.

John’s so wild, we don’t recognize the good news he’s actually preaching. The reign of God has come near, he says. That’s not a warning, that’s not a prediction, that’s a promise. *That’s good news*. God is right here. God is involved in this world. Things are going to re-set, restart, and be refined. The world is going to get better. And one is coming who is going to lead us there.

If this reminds you just a little of Isaiah, it’s supposed to. Isaiah spoke to a people in crisis and said, it’s going to get better. One is coming who will lead us - who will stand as a signal to the people. And the world will know peace. And then Isaiah painted a word portrait of the Peaceable Kingdom:

The cow and the bear shall graze;  
their young shall lie down together;  
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. <sup>2</sup>

Writing down the story of John the Baptist, Matthew wanted the people to connect Jesus all the way back through the prophets - so he made the connection plain: John, the prophet baptizer, was in the line of the prophets who spoke to the Jewish people and their kings. Just as those ancient prophets foretold, John pointed to an anointed one who would come, like a new David. Matthew connects John and Jesus to remind us of Jesus’ credibility.

Writing down the story of Jesus, Matthew traced Jesus’ lineage - through Joseph, back to David and further still.

---

<sup>1</sup> [https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf2003fbb/shawnthea\\_monroe\\_repent\\_and\\_reset](https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf2003fbb/shawnthea_monroe_repent_and_reset)

<sup>2</sup> (*Isaiah 11 is portrayed in John Swanson’s Peaceable Kingdom on the bulletin cover.*)

We must always be careful to note that Isaiah and other Jewish prophets were not predicting Jesus - and careful every Christmas not to stumble into Christian supersessionism. But early followers of Jesus saw in him echoes of ancient Jewish tradition. As Cheryl Lindsay puts it, "This story is not written about Jesus, but as Christians, we can perceive Jesus in the story."<sup>3</sup>

So we hear John the Baptist, setting the stage for Jesus by preaching, drawing from ancient tradition and his own inspiration.

Good news. God is right here.

So change, transform, go in a new direction. What's usually translated 'Repent!' is the Greek *metanoia* - literally, change your mind. Reorient. Re-center yourself on God's kingdom, God's ways. Bear fruits worthy of this change.

Ancient sources tell us that John the Baptist had his own school of followers - there may indeed have been a conflict between John's crew and followers of Jesus' Way. There are stories in the gospels when they send messengers back and forth to each other. A little cousin rivalry, perhaps?

Any of us who've fought with family or friends might see glimmers of good news here - that John and Jesus wound up working together for good.

Some say that's why the Gospels are all careful to record John deferring to Jesus' power and authority. The victor of a conflict writes the history of it. John said:

I'm more convinced of the cooperating cousins, though. I think they made peace with each other. John had a word about Jesus.

"I baptize you with water for repentance, but the one who is coming after me is more powerful than I, and I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire."

*Listen up: he's the one with the even bigger ideas. Y'all - he's going to light this world on fire.*

*The reign of God has come near - change and be part of it. Bear fruit worthy of it. Don't be stuck in the ways of injustice - turn toward a new Way.*

The good news of great joy this season and every Advent is the possibility of transformation.

---

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.ucc.org/sermon-seeds/sermon-seeds-stand-as-a-signal/>

Our hearts might be transformed by peace.

Our relationships might be changed by peace.

Our world might be reoriented toward peace.

God's reign is on the way - it is already and not yet - but surely it comes closer when we choose to turn toward it and be part of it.

When we choose to bear fruit of justice and of peace.

When our lives become a painting of the peaceable kingdom.

When we choose metanoia - transformation as John preached.

When we orient to a world based in his cousin Jesus' holy Way.

When we stand as a signal of that coming reality.

Amen.