

**From The Stump**  
**A Sermon by the Rev. Scott Herr**  
**First Presbyterian, New Canaan – December 4, 2022**

**Please Read:**  
**Isaiah 11:1-10**  
**Matthew 3:1-12**

Yesterday as some of us were watching the Word Cup together, the topic of preaching came up. Shouldn't the message be inspiring and uplifting? Isn't there enough doom and gloom in the news? Don't we come to church to get away from it all and find a little joy? I agree that worship doesn't always have to be serious. Jesus did say, "I have come that your joy may be complete," but what do you do with this morning's gospel text? Whenever I see John the Baptist come up in the lectionary, it's like, "Here we go again..." John the Baptist is annoying, and it's difficult to put a fun spin on him. I'd prefer just about anything to *the voice of one crying in the wilderness...* "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven has come near." "Prepare ye the way of the Lord!" is a call for change, and change is never easy or comfortable.

John the Baptist interrupts our nice little holy jolly Christmas preparations with his irritating call to repentance and preparation for the coming of the Lord. John's cry is particularly hard to hear as a religious leader because he called the Pharisees and Sadducees a brood "of vipers!" According to my Greek lexicon, "vipers" is definitely not a compliment! John's cry puts us all on guard, because he calls us back to reality. We who call ourselves believers, who would dare claim to be followers of Jesus, are challenged by John to "bear fruit worthy of repentance." *But what does that mean?*

Repentance *is not* feeling sorry (remorse). It is not even admitting what you did is wrong (regret). But repentance *is* at least two things: First, repentance means *changing how you think*. Too often, we feel we need to justify ourselves and all of the wrongs in which we are implicated. Too often, we hide from responsibility for personal or corporate sin. But even worse, we call it good. Malcolm Muggeridge said, "One of the peculiar sins of the 20th century which we've developed to a very high level is the sin of credulity. It has been said that when human beings stop believing in God they believe in nothing. The truth is much worse: they believe in anything."

A friend recommended the book, *Think Again: The Power of Knowing What You Don't Know*, by Adam Grant. It's got some wise advice on the power of reconsidering positions strongly held and defended. That's basically what repentance is. Μετάνοια (*metanoia*) is the Greek word for repent which simply means, "change of mind." We must learn to recalibrate our thinking, our values and sense of what is right and wrong not according to our *sociology*, our cultures and traditions; but according to our *theology*, according to the Word and Spirit of the Living God. And if you wonder what God's Word is, here's a clue: *If your reading of Scripture does not lead you to a greater love of God and love of neighbor, it's probably wrong!* So first, repentance means changing how you think.

Secondly, repentance means *changing how you live*, how you speak, act and invest your time and resources. תשובה (*teshuva*) is the Hebrew word for repent and means “to change direction.” We Christians turn our path toward “the way” of the cross, the forgiveness and self-giving love of Jesus Christ.

We repent because John reminds us the Lord is coming toward us. This is important to consider carefully. We do have hope. Our hope is the coming, the Advent, of God. We are making ready because we believe that the Lord is coming toward us to consummate what N.T. Wright calls “The Revolution.”<sup>1</sup> The Kingdom of God is subversive to the powers and principalities of this world. The reign of God’s grace and love turns everything upside down.

God’s revolution is about *shalom*. Peace is the goal of God, in the sense that God desires that we have life and life abundantly, life that is flourishing and full of joy. Peace in the biblical sense is “the way it’s supposed to be.” In Jeremiah 29:7, God calls us to “seek the peace of the city.” But God’s vision is not just for a chosen elite. Shalom is for all people, and God will help us to realize this peace in a strange and surprising way.

Isaiah declares, “A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.” When I was a teenager in Oregon, I used to go out into the woods with my dad to cut wood for our fireplaces. It was fun to use the chain saw and cut down trees with my dad. I learned there are some trees (like a fir or pine tree), that if you cut the tree off at the stump (to the ground), it probably won’t grow back. It needs the rest of the tree to survive. But there are other trees where even when you cut it down to the ground, it will grow back.

The point is a stump looks pretty hopeless, but Isaiah declared *even when you can’t see it, God is at work*. Even when the former glory of a tree has been cut off completely, new growth can happen. Even when there is just a stump, all is not lost for the people of Judah. God declares a new King will come from the line of David, a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and he will be “called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace” (9:6).

This Sovereign shall usher in a rule of peace described so beautifully by Isaiah, “The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them...” Isaiah’s vision reveals natural enemies now reconciled and set free from fear and conflict. The vision is a great reversal, where the innocent child will replace the cunning and calculating adults in leadership...

We pray for our leaders to learn from Isaiah... to lead with “wisdom and understanding,” “counsel and might,” “knowledge and the fear of the LORD” (v. 2). According to Isaiah, the anointed one of God shall be filled with the Spirit of God.

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<sup>1</sup> N.T. Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began: Reconsidering the Meaning of Jesus’s Crucifixion* (San Francisco: Harper One, 2016).

The early disciples saw in Jesus these qualities, so much that Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter, was able to say after a day with Jesus, “We have found the Messiah!” So on the one hand, we confess that this vision of the leader promised in Isaiah’s vision has been fulfilled in Jesus Christ. But on the other hand, the fullness of his Kingdom has yet to be realized.

We of the church find ourselves in the strange “in between” times of having experienced the nearness of the reign of Jesus but being called “to prepare for his coming” anew in the here and now. It’s important for us to remember that as we are praying, “Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven,” we are acknowledging that there is more repentance and restoration required to prepare for God’s reign in us and our world so that all people experience God’s peace; the way it’s supposed to be.

And so, we are called to engage in shalom-making ministry. Jesus said, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God.” But here’s another uncomfortable truth: If you remember anything about biblical peace, remember this: *it does not mean avoiding conflict*. Sometimes seeking peace means *entering into conflict*. As long as there are enemies, violence and war, as long as there is inequity for the poor and exclusion of the outcast, as long as there are people not treated with the dignity, respect or welcome they deserve as bearers of the *imago dei*, as long as there is hatred, racism or bigotry, as long as there is a lack of forgiveness and division, as long as there are people deprived of the basic rights of food, shelter, education and work, as long as there are people who still suffer and struggle to be free of violence, abuse, fear, oppression, and injustice... *the Church is still called to be in conflict with the powers and principalities; to be the Church militant; onward Christian soldiers...*

I suppose that’s why we light candles and pray and listen to the voice of one crying in the wilderness, as irritating and provocative as it may sound in this “most wonderful time of the year.” That’s why we drape purple in the midst of all of the Christmas decorations and pray prayers of repentance when the rest of the world is partying and getting in the holiday spirit!

In order not to end up getting thrown into the fire, I invite you to reflect more deeply on what it looks like for you to bear fruit worthy of repentance? Strangely, maybe we need to learn from the little children most of whom will be ripping the wrappings off of their Christmas presents in a few short weeks? We are about ready to celebrate God’s greatest gift of all in the birth of Jesus, so perhaps we need to rip off all of the stuff we wrap ourselves in to make us feel and look good - status, piety, wealth, power, our smug self-righteousness - so that we can meet God face to face?

The gospel is that the shoot of Jesse is the righteous Savior Jesus, and he is our Judge. Thankfully he will judge us with forgiveness, grace and love, so that we can live in true freedom and peace. He sets us free to take a new path of self-giving love that

allows for God's Advent to be experienced by all people, even the lost, the least, and the lonely ones.

Friends, as you prepare to come to the table, as beautiful as it all is here today, remember that for God's new Kingdom peace to be realized, sometimes the ax must be laid at the root of the trees. Sometimes all we will see is The Stump. So many faithful knew that seeking peace (righteousness, justice and truth) is risky business. John's head, you'll recall, ended up on a platter. Jesus' body ended up nailed to a tree. At times it can all look so utterly hopeless.

So, rather than find our happy place, go into denial or shut the world out, the good news is that the Lord comes, and he will have the last Word. "A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse..." And in Him, "the Kingdom of Heaven has come near!"

*In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Amen!*