



Sermon for the Second Sunday of Advent
Rev. Jonathan Stepp
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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

A dog got lost in a jungle. A lion saw him from a distance and says with caution "this guy looks edible, I've never seen his kind before". So the lion starts rushing towards the dog. The dog notices and starts to panic but as he's about to run he sees some bones scattered about on the ground, so sits down among the bones and says loudly "mmm...that was some good lion meat!".

The lion abruptly stops and says "woah! This guy seems tougher than he looks, I better leave while I can". Meanwhile, sitting on nearby tree branch, a monkey sees all this happening and decided that he can benefit from this situation by telling the lion.

So the monkey proceeds to tell the lion what really happened and the lion says angrily "get on my back, we'll go get him together". So they start rushing back to the dog. The dog sees them coming and starts to panic even more. Then he gets a brilliant idea and he calls out loudly, "where the heck is that monkey? I told him to bring me another lion an hour ago."

In our text today from the Hebrew scriptures, Isaiah has a vision of a more peaceful time for lions, lambs, wolves, and cows. This hopeful picture of a better future for the whole creation is sometimes referred to as "the peaceable kingdom" and has been a frequent subject of art throughout history. You might be familiar, for example, with a series of paintings created by the American Quaker folk painter Edward Hicks in the nineteenth century that depicted this imagery or a choral work by the twentieth century composer Randall Thompson which is based on both the Isaiah text and Hicks' paintings depicting the text.

This imagery of a world at peace, where even the natural order has been reordered, has captured the hearts and minds of people for centuries. The words themselves are resonant with powerful imagery that speaks to the deepest hopes and desires of all people. A world where "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."

But what would it take for the world to be transformed in this way? When Isaiah wrote these words, over two millennia ago, he seems to have envisioned something unique to the people of Israel because he ties the coming of this peaceable kingdom to the Kings of Israel. That's what he's referring to when he says that "a shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse . . . [and] the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples . . ." Jesse was the name of King David's father and all the Kings of Judah were descendant from him. So, in the same way that we might talk about the house of Windsor as the family that currently rules on the British throne, so the people of Isaiah's time spoke of the house of Jesse in reference to their kings.

But you'll notice that something has gone wrong. Isaiah describes the royal house as a "stump" – the family tree has been chopped down and probably turned into firewood. The line of kings descended from Jesse and his son King David has failed. Scholars debate what exactly Isaiah had in mind here – it may be that this passage was written after Judah had been conquered by Babylon, the Temple of Solomon had been destroyed, and the house of Jesse removed from rulership over Judah. Or, it may be that it was written a century or so before those events and Isaiah is using the imagery of the "stump" and the tree being chopped down to describe the moral and religious failures of the kings of his time.

Either the way, the scriptures are pointing us to the fact that the peaceable kingdom depends on the coming of someone new, someone unique, someone special – someone who is of the house of Jesse and David but is not a failure as the other kings of that house were. What is needed, Isaiah, says is an Advent – if I may use that word – an Advent of something revolutionary that will change the world. What will it take for the world to be transformed into the peaceable kingdom? Isaiah says that it will take a descendant of David who, unlike his royal ancestors, is empowered with wisdom and understanding and the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.

This, then, is where Jesus enters the picture and we turn our attention to the gospel text from Matthew. The earliest Christians were deeply convinced that Jesus was the shoot from the stump of Jesse – that he was the descendant of King David to whom the prophets looked and for whose Advent they lived in hope. In fact, the genealogical tables that open the books of Matthew and Luke are there to establish how Jesus was descended in multiple branches of his family tree from the house of Jesse and was therefore the one spoken of by Isaiah. That's why this imagery of the stump of Jesse also sometimes appears in Christmas carols – perhaps

you remember the opening words to one which say “Lo, how a rose e’er blooming, From tender stem hath sprung. Of Jesse’s lineage coming, As men of old have sung.”

And yet, as soon as we turn our eyes toward Jesus as the prophesied one, we face the challenge we hear today in the words of John the Baptizer. This new King is coming, we are told, with an ax in his hand to cut down trees at the root and throw them into the fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will burn the chaff with unquenchable fire. A winnowing fork was a tool used in ancient times to toss harvested wheat in the air so that the chaff – that is, the lighter, useless bits of straw and husk – would be blown away and only the useful wheat would be left behind.

At first glance these may seem to be contradictory images. On the one hand Isaiah describes a peaceable kingdom where no one will be hurt and yet John says that Jesus is coming to burn with unquenchable fire. Which is it? I believe the key to understanding the images is in the deeper answer to this question I have posed a couple of times now: how do we get from where we are, in this world of violence and hatred, to the world envisioned by Isaiah?

Something in us must be changed and change is not always a pleasant experience. Sometimes the chaff, the useless stuff inside us, needs to be burned up with unquenchable fire. Sometimes the parts of our lives that are not productive, the parts of us that are like fruit trees that do not bear fruit, have to be cut down with an ax and destroyed. Only such a radical transformation of our human nature can transform the world into a peaceable kingdom and Jesus, John tells us, the one to make the transformation. He is the descendant of Jesse who will burn out of us all that prevents us from living in the peaceable kingdom and thereby usher in a new world.

In that sense, Jesus is like a doctor or a surgeon. In fact, that was a very common image used to describe him among ancient Christians. As a doctor might prescribe something painful and unpleasant – like chemo, radiation, or radical surgery – in order to burn and chop out of us the disease that might kill us, so Jesus might also prescribe radical treatments to transform us into people who are prepared for the peaceable kingdom.

That’s why our reading from Matthew is ultimately good news. It is the good news that we can now see the way from where we are to where we want to be: from this world of violence to the life of the world to come. That way is Jesus, the one who will stop at nothing, and use any means necessary, to heal us of the sin that would destroy us.

In this season of Advent, as we make our homes and hearts ready for his coming, may we have the faith to see that Jesus' healing work is for our good and for the transformation of the world. As our collect today says, may God "give us grace to heed the warnings of the prophets and forsake our sins, that we may greet with joy the coming of Jesus Christ our Redeemer."

Amen.