

Introduction

Check-in & Introductions

Prepare

Sermon Reflection Notes

In John Wesley's time, the elite went to church on Sunday mornings while the working class worked. Wesley submitted himself to 'be more vile' and began preaching in the open air to coal miners and laborers because he believed the message of salvation was for the laborers too. Wesley was so committed to this he founded a school in Bristol, a radical idea to offer education to the children of coal miners and preachers and the working class. The school still stands today. A tree in the courtyard of the school was uprooted in a storm one year and was left to rot, but the next spring, new life—new sprouts came forth.

We all have a tree. We like to call them family trees, and in all our family trees, we have some branches that bear fruit and others, just nuts. The Isaiah scripture brings up the family tree of Jesse, a royal Israelite tree that had been cut down in exile and left for dead. No one had any hope that life could come out of this tree. Except for God.

"But it happened. The wonderous impossible. It came right out of that chopped down stump. The miracle no one ever dreamed of except for God. God never stopped dreaming of the miracle, the one He'd dreamed of from the very beginning because love never stops dreaming of a way to draw close again. If you slowed and looked very closely, you could actually see it coming straight out of that family tree that had been cut right down. A miraculous shoot was springing up right out of the stump. A tender and vulnerable green shoot was growing hope again. Growing love again" (*The Jesse Tree*).

The hope of renewal and redemption is always alive with God. For Isaiah, this little bit of hope was not a return to the old days of Israelite domination. Instead, it is an image of God who cares above all for the meek and the poor, those clothed in righteousness and faithfulness. There is a Hebrew word in the scripture passage we translate as 'judge,' the word *mishpat*. But it means more than judge; to be judged with *mishpat*, with justice, is to be judged in a society that cares for the most marginalized, the most needy. That's what God's king, the ideal king, labors toward.

We struggle to imagine how the world is supposed to work according to God. We struggle to let go of our preconceived notions and imagine a world rooted in abundance and peace and love. John the Baptist's job was to prepare the way of the Lord, to ready the path for the coming God we struggle to image. He called on people to repent, to turn toward God. He asked, "Are you ready? Are you ready to stand before the face of God?" John asked these questions, not in a beautiful church, but in a remote wilderness where it's hard to find your way and some become lost. The wilderness is a big part of the story; it connects the Good News of Jesus to Isaiah, Elijah, and Moses. The wilderness was where the Hebrew people found the greatest tests of faith, tests they often failed miserably. And yet, God remained faithful. John the Baptist was trying to get people ready for the coming God. He reminded the spiritual and political leaders of the time that just because they had influence and power in the world did not mean God needed them in His kingdom. If they didn't do the work God called them to do, God could make the rocks participate in the work of the kingdom in their place. If they wouldn't turn from sin, do acts of justice, care for the poor, hear the cry of the needy, God would cut them down; the axe was ready according to John the Baptist. He didn't mince words; he wasn't interested in being nice. John the Baptist just told the truth.

We wait for the coming of Christ, but waiting is not passive. It is active. Don't let a rock be more ready for Jesus than we are. The kingdom of God is near. Prepare the way of the Lord.

Scripture

Isaiah 11:1-10 (NRSVUE)

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. ²The 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. ³His 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, ⁴but 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. ⁵Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist and faithfulness the belt around his loins.

⁶The 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. ⁷The cow and the bear shall graze; their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. ⁸The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. ⁹They 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.

Return of the Remnant of Israel and Judah ¹⁰On 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." ³This 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.'"

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

⁷But 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? ⁸Therefore, bear fruit worthy of repentance, ⁹and 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. ¹⁰Even 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. ¹²His 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."

Discussion Questions

1. There is a lot of imagery in both scripture passages this week. Which images help us imagine the coming kingdom of God? Which ones help us see the world clearly? Why use imagery to share such important messages as those conveyed by Isaiah and John the Baptist?
2. Pastor Ron shared the story of John Wesley choosing to preach in the open air, to those society considered unworthy. Isaiah's message was to a people living under the threat of invasion and destruction, living with little to no hope. John the Baptist preached in the wilderness where it was easy to lose your way. Why would they choose those audiences, these places? What did their messages have in common?

3. The Hebrew word “mishpat” means judgment AND justice. We often separate the two in English. Are they different? Can we judge people and be champions of justice at the same time? Why or why not?
4. What is the work we are called to do to prepare the way of the Lord? What are concrete, specific things we can and should be doing?
5. Often, we see uprooted trees, literally and metaphorically, and ‘cut our losses.’ We turn away, leaving the stumps for dead. This Advent, how can we remind each other and the world that renewal and redemption is always alive in God? How can we help each other draw closer to love?

Closing Prayer

Wonderful, miraculous, steadfast God,

We come into this season of Advent surrounded by stumps. We feel uprooted by the sorrows and injustices and fears of the world that seep into our pores and lodge in our hearts. We cannot imagine the wolf and the lamb, the lion and the calf eating together in peace. We cannot untether ourselves from reality long enough to dream even the possibility of a different way. We try to hope and find ourselves groping in the dark. Turn us away from despair and back toward you. Send us again the light of your love. Remind us, again, that we have a role to play, a call to answer. Give us the strength and the hope to follow you, the one who always hopes, who always dreams of a way to come close again, the one for whom we wait this Advent. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.

“Love never stops dreaming of a way to draw close again.”