

## **In Time to Come**

Advent A2-peace

Isaiah 11: 1-10, Mt 3: 1-12

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### *Isaiah 11: 1-10*

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. 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. 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; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek 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. Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins. 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. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. 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. 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.

### *Mt 3: 1-12*

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." 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.'" Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "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. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. "I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 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."

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"You'll shoot your eye out!"

Poor Ralphie, there is an entire movie centered on the words he did not want to hear while hoping for an official Red Ryder carbine action 200 range shot model air rifle for Christmas.

“You’ll shoot your eye out!” He heard it from his teacher, his mother, and even Santa himself.

It is hard in this season of lights, tinsel, wishes and carols to hear words that we do not want to hear. Yet our gospel lesson for today brings words that are hard to listen to.

“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

We do not expect to hear such words of reproach and shame in the midst of jingling bells. We are waiting for the Messiah, the One who shall wear righteousness as the belt around his waist, and faithfulness as the belt around his loins, the One who will usher in the peaceable kingdom, who will bring about paradise restored. Yet the Advent journey as we are Bethlehem bound takes us past the River Jordan, to a man wearing clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and whose food is locusts and wild honey. John the Baptist called all who would listen to his message to repent, to own up to past wrongs, to feel regret with a commitment to change for the better.

John the Baptist, once an infant who leapt in the womb when Mary came to visit his mother Elizabeth to share the good and incredible news that she would be the mother of God’s son, has been preparing the way for his cousin’s ministry ever since.

John baptized with water for repentance, teaching those around him to believe in the One who was coming after him, that is, to prepare the way and to believe in Jesus. John’s baptism was a symbol of having changed one’s mind and ways for the new direction where Jesus would lead. Being baptized by John confirmed a recognition of one’s sin, a desire for spiritual cleansing, and a commitment to follow God’s law in anticipation of the Messiah’s arrival.

John’s message has a strong sense of urgency for swift action. He knows that Jesus is on the horizon, that time is short, and he must prepare as many people as possible. There is no time for gentle encouragement, tender patience. The winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor. He will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.

John had a clear and vivid image of the work of the coming Messiah, knowing Jesus would change the world, although it was not quite as John had anticipated. Jesus came not seeking chaff for an unquenchable fire but rather an unquenchable peace. In his healing, his teaching, his compassionate love of the abandoned, the poor, the outcast, and in his dying and rising, he offered unquenchable peace. In time to come, ‘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. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.’ In time to come there will be a peaceable kingdom, an unquenchable peace.

When some Pharisees and Sadducees approached John for baptism, he challenged them as a brood of vipers, questioning if they deserved to escape the coming wrath. It was not enough that they were coming to participate in a ritual. They must be genuine, legitimate, sincere in their repentance, they must bear good fruit. They must be worthy.

Pharisees appeared to be a peaceful and pious people as they applied Jewish law to even the most mundane tasks of daily living, yet they lived in a spiritual darkness lording their holy piety as contempt over others. They must truly let go of their pompous piety, they must be ready to hear and accept Jesus’ call to love one another.

Sadducees were the priestly class who had gone astray to become political opportunists who thrived on wealth and corruption rather than their religious duties. John called them back to the true meaning of their priestly duties and the religious tasks of serving God and caring for the temple. They must lead by example with faithful and pure hearts.

“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire”

These are words that we do not want to hear, yet we cannot simply pass by John the Baptist on our way to Bethlehem. We too must stop by the River Jordan ourselves. We must be ready for the One who is coming. We need to hear, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness.” We too must “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.”

It is not enough John says, to sing the carols of the season, to give gifts to those we love, to decorate with lights and garland. We must prepare the way for Christ, the justice, compassion, peace and hope of Christ. We must be inwardly ready for the One who is coming, for the Desire of nations who will bind all people in heart and mind, and bid envy, strife and quarrels to cease as he fills the world with heavenly peace. In whatever ways we cling to a false sense of importance, we must let them go to be ready to live in harmony, in peace, with God, with others and with ourselves.

Standing beside the Jordan, what do each of us need to let go of? What, who, might we need to forgive, or accept, or make peace with? What must each of us do to prepare the way of the Lord, to make his path straight?

As we move on beyond the River Jordan towards Bethlehem, may you find yourselves even more ready for the coming of Christ, ready to feel embraced by his unquenchable peace.

And may you, in the childhood innocence of Ralphie, know the greatest Christmas gift we will ever receive. Amen.