

2nd Sunday of Advent, December 4, 2022
Isaiah 11:1-10; Matthew 3:1-12

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Grace to you and peace from God our Creator and the Lord Jesus Christ.

What would your ideal life look like? I mean, If you could snap your fingers and make it so right now, what kind of life would we be looking at? For most of us I'm going to guess that that looks like being free from the mundane concerns of everyday life. And the first thing we probably jump to is that money would be no object. (Our culture has taught us well.) The ideal life, we imagine, is one in which we have enough money to buy ourselves what we need, and enable us to do the things we want to do. Travel is at the top of my list. But some of us are also acutely aware that independence also means being free from our physical ailments and limitations. So we imagine our ideal lives as being health and physically fit. And if scientists could figure out how to stop, or even reverse the aging process, that would be welcome too.

When we're finished imagining all of the things we would do for ourselves we might then remember our loved ones, and think about making their lives better too. But I suspect that would involve the same sorts of things for them as well: buying them whatever they wanted, whatever would make them happy, helping them to be independent of the daily grind, and freeing them from illness and pain. As I said, our culture has taught us well. We've been taught to think of our ideal lives in very individualistic and materialistic ways. Our ideal lives are *our* ideal lives. We do not tend to think, in such hypothetical scenarios, of the common good as being intimately connected to our own good. Nor have we been conditioned to think of the ideal life as one in which *everyone* prospers equally. After all, who would be our servants in such a scenario? Who would serve us our fast food, or pick our produce? Who would cater to our every whim?

I think it says something important about us and our hopes and dreams that the vision of *God's* future expressed by Isaiah in our first reading this morning does not look very much like the visions we tend to dream up. Isaiah's vision is of predators and prey living peacefully together – wolves and lambs, lions and calves, side by side without fear. It's a vision of young children playing safely around deadly snakes. "They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain," says God. It's a remarkable image, don't you think? Can you imagine such a world, a world in which no creature preys on another, where there is no violence and no coercion of any kind? It's important to realize that this vision isn't only about the natural world but also about human behavior, where some are wolves and some are lambs, figuratively speaking. And why wasn't this *our* vision when we thought about what an ideal life would be?

In order for these visions to be realized, things would have to change. But the *kinds* of change needed are telling. In order for *our* visions to be fulfilled, the only thing that has to change is our external circumstances. There is nothing about us as individuals, nothing in our behavior or attitude that needs to change. And there is nothing in the world around us that has to change either. But in order for God's vision to be fulfilled some of the characters in that vision will have to change in a very fundamental way. The predators are going to have to change their diet. Lions eating straw and bears grazing like cattle will require radical transformation. And the wolves of Wall Street are going to have to change too, as well as who prey on others for their living – even those who invest their money in the system as it works now. And that, uncomfortably, includes me. And lots of you too, I expect.

There is another image that conveys this fundamental change, and it runs through all three of our readings this morning. It is the image of the stump or root of Jesse. To understand this image you need to remember that Jesse is the father of David, the second king of Israel, and the one from whom all future kings descended. It also helps to remember that God was against the

idea of the Israelites having a king from the very beginning. God warned them that they would become like other nations, and that their kings would abuse their position. But the people insisted that they would be an exception, and so for some reason God allowed them to have their way. But of course God turns out to be right about this, and when the tribes of Israel are finally conquered, Isaiah compares this to a tree being cut down, and God is the one wielding the axe.

Now being cut down, I think you'll agree, is a significant event in the life of a tree. But it is not always the end of its life. I've told you before about the Mimosa tree we had in our back yard down in Carbondale. Half of that tree came down in a storm one year, and the other half was in danger of coming down on the house in the next storm. So we had to have the rest of it cut down. But that was not the end of that tree. Within a month there were a bunch of new shoots growing out of the stump. If we had let them grow that tree would have eventually come back. And that is the image of hope that Isaiah is using here, and that Paul picks up on in Romans.

John the Baptist, on the other hand, is not so hopeful in our Gospel reading. John called on God's people to repent, to change their ways. And when leaders of the religious establishment show up to receive baptism, he lays into them. They are a damaged tree that needs to come down. Their lives need to be radically changed if there is to be any hope of life. The axe is at the root of the tree he warns them. They're about to be chopped down.

We don't like to think that this kind of message has much to do with us. We don't imagine that God would similarly judge us, or our collective behavior the way God judged the people of Israel so long ago. We can't imagine that God would lay an axe to *our* tree. We are special people, an exception to the rule, don't you know. But God is not impressed by pedigrees, passports, or any other supposed special statuses. God is interested in fruits. God blessed Abraham and his descendants so that they would be a blessing to all the nations of the earth. When they stopped doing that, they became a dying tree, and had to come down. So if God has blessed us, and I think God has, it has to be with a similar goal in mind. And we ignore that at our peril.

What these readings mean for us this morning depends very much on who we are and what our lives are looking like at the moment. If things are looking more hopeless than hopeful, if the storms of life have brought things crashing down on us like a fallen tree, then we very much need to hear the hopeful message of Isaiah's vision to the people of Israel as they were being conquered. God is not satisfied to let the stump of our lives be the last word. There is new life yet to come.

If, on the other hand, we are weathering the storms just fine – I noticed, by the way, that the stock market has been recovering nicely of late, which is good for our portfolios, right? – if we're doing just fine while all around us other people's lives are being devastated in one way or another, we might need to hear John the Baptist's warning about the axe at the root of the tree.

But one way or another, one thing is for certain: God's mission to save and bless the world God loves, is one that will not be obstructed, not by rotten trunks and dead branches, not even by a cross and a grave. God is committed to bringing forth good fruit from us in order to make God's beautiful, hopeful vision of our future a reality. That's going to involve some winnowing and some threshing, some trimming of dead branches, some sorting out of grain from chaff, what is good in us and what is evil, and it may even involve an axe or a chainsaw. That's not a pretty or a painless process. But when it is God a work, it is a hopeful one. The good and promising news for us now, still in these early days of Advent, is that one thing I wanted you to remember from last week's sermon. God is with us in Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit to make in us the change that is needed for the life of the world. May we trust that promise through good times and through bad, and may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, grow our hearts and minds into Christ Jesus. Amen.