

Isaiah 11:1-10
December 5, 2010

Matthew 3:1-12
St. James U.C.C.

KEEP AWAKE

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Each Advent, some of the words of the prophets are included in our scripture readings. This year we are reading from Isaiah, Luke and Matthew. The prophets knew that their people longed for a world that was more just, more loving, and more joy-filled. We read their writing in Advent because they capture both our own yearnings for God to come and change things, and the hope we find in God's promises.

Prophets are people who speak in the name of God. In the Bible, prophets deliver social and religious criticism; they make announcements about the future; and they take message to individual people. The people respond to them because they recognize God's voice in the prophets' speech and actions.

The prophets were not predicting the future. They did not see themselves as forecasting the birth of Jesus. Prophecy, unlike predictions, was understood in Israel to be a way of talking about God's presence, expectations, and activity **then**.

Each year we read passages from Isaiah in Advent because of his themes of waiting with joy and expectation for God's salvation. Isaiah was not writing for Advent, but was speaking God's word to his own generation. Because Isaiah understood the nature of God's love and hope so clearly in his own time, we can find the parallels to our own.

Isaiah's utopian vision comes from a time that was anything but utopian. Isaiah lived at a time when Judah was under imminent threat from the growing might of the Assyrian Empire. In Isaiah we read the wolf lies down with the lamb. A child leads. The God of Israel is the God of all people. God's coming brings judgment to those who least expect it. Righteousness is not a matter of one's own holiness, but requires us to seek justice for all. Our God is a God of surprises. But Isaiah proclaims that a shoot will come from

what seems to be a dead tree stump, a leader on whom God's spirit will rest. This passage places two concepts side by side: righteousness and judgment. This leader who will come will not only be of David's line, but will also be of David's heart, committed to justice, righteousness, and peace.

This leader will preside over fundamental changes to the violent cultures of the earth. This vision extends God's covenant with Abraham to all peoples. God's righteousness and judgment will permeate the entire world, and people need not fear God's judgment because it is just.

Matthew points to John the Baptizer as a fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy. We read scripture last Sunday about Elizabeth and Zechariah having a son named John in their old age. 2 Kings 1:8 tells us "he will be wearing a cloak made of animal skins, tied with a leather belt". John was like a hermit in the wilderness, eccentric, peculiar. His clothing and diet are noted because they are not the norm. He lived in a hostile environment of the Judean wilderness, and in this harsh location he walks about speaking of repentance. His charisma partly comes from his refusal to participate in the reigning religious and civic customs of the day, choosing instead to howl his message of repentance. John explains that his baptism by water is simply preparation for the coming of one who is more powerful who will judge between the wheat and the chaff.

John was sent ahead to prepare the way for Jesus, "he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." The word for spirit in Hebrew is *ruach*. In Greek the word *pneuma* means not only spirit but breath. Breath is life and therefore the promise of the Spirit is the promise of life. The Spirit of God breathes God's life into a person. When we are tired, weary, defeated, *ruach* the spirit enters us and a new life enters us. Then we are able to handle what comes our way. Our eyes are opened, our hearts are opened, our prejudices are taken away and we see with a new light.

Let us ‘Keep Awake’ this Advent season and look to follow Jesus in a life of discipleship that involves caring for others, for the poor, to be concerned with justice and truth, and to put our commitment to God above all else.

Pre-Christmas is a season of distraction. We stress the important of buying too many gifts, planning huge meals, baking too many cookies, and managing family gatherings. So often the materialistic side of the season calls us. God’s call is to remember the poor, and the meek. Advent can be a time to invite and bring people to Jesus.

Our “God is still speaking” is our voice in the wilderness like John’s voice. Jesus didn’t turn people away. Neither do we. “No matter who you are, or where you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here. We are a church of diversity, all are welcome”

God’s coming reign may be very different from what we are expecting, turning upside down some of our cherished beliefs and traditions. This advent season, what story will we tell? How will we welcome others as Christ welcomes us – even as we await Christ’s coming?

I leave you with a message from Ron Buford from the “God is still Speaking” campaign. “Like those who awaited the miracle that would come to pass 2,000 years ago, we await experience in which the holy is born again in our midst as men, women, girls and boys find a spiritual home among us and fresh hope is born in them and in us. We wait. We welcome. We expect God’s little surprises. We expect challenges and we will overcome them”

Thanks be to God for all of you, for this congregation, for this time of challenge, of opportunity, for the grace we have to live and serve in this time, and for the United Church of Christ and all who will find it or fall in love with it all over again.

I’d like to share The Christmas Pledge by Jo Robinson and Jean Coppock Staeheli
Believing in the true spirit of Christmas, I commit myself to:

1. Remember those people who truly need my gifts;
2. Express my love in more direct ways than gifts;
3. Examine my holiday activities in the light of my deepest values;
4. Be a peacemaker within my circle of family and friends; and
5. Rededicate myself to my spiritual growth. Amen”

Please pray with me,

Surprise us, O God, with the vision of your reign. Strengthen us to uphold your justice and righteousness. Stir us to welcome all people as you have welcomed us. Amen