

Unless you have somehow been absent from the planet these past days, you probably realize that we are presently standing in the fast lane of change and acceleration of activity. The Christmas City of the North Parade happened last Friday, you know, and Bentleyville opened their gates on Saturday. Thanksgiving is this Thursday; Friday is Black Friday. Julebyen is gaining on us rapidly, as is Christmas itself. The holiday season is upon us; buckle up and hold on for dear life!

This year, the season may be somewhat dampened by world events. The horror of the war in the Holy Land seems intensified by this season of anticipating Christ's birth there 2000 years ago. Many of us are dealing with health concerns or broken relationships, or we may just be feeling either depressed and lonely, or depleted by the coming of this busy time when we're supposed to feel cheerful. This is hardly the first time we've entered the holiday season under a cloud; think of 2020, when the pandemic was in full swing in our area. Or of the holiday seasons during the World Wars of the last century, or of the Black Plague in Medieval Europe, or what have you. We all know the reality of life in a broken world, but it just seems *more* broken when we contrast it with the expectations we have for holiday times. The fact of the matter is---all is not well. We know it. And God knows it. And our lessons this morning reflect this reality.

This morning we are meeting up with Isaiah, the third prophet we've heard about in this month of November. We encountered Elijah 2 weeks ago, a prophet fierce in his commitment to rid Israel of idolatry around 850 BC. Elijah was the colorful and dramatic man who worked miracles and challenged the prophets of Ba'al to that contest of fire. Last Sunday we thought about Hosea, who lived around 750 BC, a prophet also in the northern kingdom of the divided Israel who spoke God's words of sorrow, anger, and love in regard to the unfaithfulness of God's people. Today, we look at Isaiah, who lived about the same time as Hosea. But, Isaiah was active in the *southern* kingdom, called Judah, which was experiencing similar woes to the northern kingdom---a lack of faithfulness to God and a propensity for actions that oppressed the poor and vulnerable. The prophets, we have learned, were neither fortune-tellers nor moral scolds. They were of varied backgrounds

and styles, with only their passion for God as a common feature. Frederick Beuchner makes this wonderful remark about the prophets: “The prophets were drunk on God, and in the presence of their terrible tipsiness, no one was ever comfortable. With a total lack of tact, they roared out against phoniness and corruption whenever they found them. Most of the prophets went a little mad before they were through, if they weren’t a little mad to begin with. You can hardly blame them. A prophet’s quarrel with the world was deep-down, a lover’s quarrel. If they didn’t love the world, they probably wouldn’t bother to tell it anything. Their quarrel was God’s quarrel.”

Isaiah took up God’s quarrel with the world in *his* time and place. Unlike Elijah and Hosea, Isaiah was a member of the Hebrew aristocracy. He may even have been a priest, a professional. He was a married man with 2 sons. He was a poet, a statesman, even a shrewd politician. Some compare him to an 8<sup>th</sup> century Hebrew version of Thomas Jefferson. He was likely one of the outstanding minds of his time, about 750 years before the birth of Christ. Isaiah was perhaps around the age of 18 when he received the extraordinary call to service that we read about in the 6<sup>th</sup> chapter of Isaiah. Standing in the Temple, he has a vision of the Lord, surrounded by angels, and he hears God ask: “Who will go for us, and whom shall I send?” Remarkably, Isaiah responds, “Here am I! Send me.” He served as a prophet for around 40 years, and as we’ve discussed in previous weeks, prophets tended to be unpopular people. According to legend, Isaiah was executed by being sawn in two. Taking up God’s lover’s quarrel with the world is a risky thing to do.

It’s not hard to understand why God *has* a lover’s quarrel with the world. A glance at the news suffices. The world is not what God intends it to be; as we have already acknowledged--*all is not well*. And given God’s passionate love for the world, an on-going lover’s quarrel is inevitable. Isaiah continues in the tradition of the prophets before him in denouncing both idolatry and injustice. He repeatedly implores the Hebrew people to turn back to God, to live justly and peaceably. But, Isaiah also introduces a *new* note: he recognizes that humanity is just not *ever* going to get it right. There will be better kings and worse kings, and better kingdoms and worse kingdoms, but ultimately—we just don’t get it right. Isaiah declares that although this experiment in

kingship, from David through Solomon and on down, is having pretty mixed results and is *proving* that we just don't get it right, God *will* get it right. God will send a descendant of David, a messiah, which means "anointed one", who *will* get it right. One who will live out fully the vision God has for the world. One who will not be unfaithful or weak or arrogant or selfish. God will provide an alternative King, and *that* King will change the world. We, as Christians, see that fulfillment in Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ or Messiah. And this messianic message is what made Isaiah unique among the prophets up to his time.

God is often pictured in a variety of human terms throughout Scripture, including in today's lessons. In the famous 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, for example, God is portrayed as a Sheperd. Last week, in Hosea's poignant prose, God was described as an anguished parent, grieving their child's coldness. This morning, we are presented with God as a Gardener. The ancient world was all about agriculture, of course, with subsistence farming as the norm. So there are many agricultural references in the Bible, in both Testaments. This is not the first time or the last time in the Scriptures that God will be pictured as a gardener. In fact, in the very 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter of the Bible, in Genesis 2, we learn that God creates the world as a garden paradise, in which the first humans are placed to till and enjoy it. We all know that goes bad, though, as a result of human sin and folly. The same pattern is represented in the first part of our lesson this morning. God is pictured as planting the nation of Israel as a vineyard. All that can be done for this vineyard's successful fruiting is done; God provides the perfect place, the best soil, the most devoted tending to the vines. And yet, just as in Genesis 2, human folly and sin change what should be a garden paradise into an overgrown mess of thorns and briars, with only bitter, wild grapes as the fruit. God, as gardener, is frustrated, disappointed, and weary. In fact, just as we, as gardeners, sometimes conclude we need to uproot whatever isn't growing properly and start again, so God concludes that may be the best solution for this particular garden. God continues to send prophets, but the peoples of both the northern and southern kingdom of Israel will ignore them; they are left to their own devices, which brings about their eventual ruin.

This first section of our text tends towards the grim. But the second section is much more hopeful. In fact, these words from Isaiah 11 are a part of the text used in Handel's Messiah, and some of us may hear strains of music in our minds as we read the words. The agricultural imagery continues, but this time it is an image of unexpected growth and new beginnings, the image of a green shoot coming out from a stump that looks all done in and used up. This is not at all an uncommon thing for *us* to see; it can be amazing how shoots can find a way to grow, whether out of a dead stump, or through the crack in the sidewalk, or along the rocky ledge of the North Shore shoreline. God's Spirit so energizes the created world that life can find a way in the most unlikely of circumstances. Which is a source of hope for us. It means that life can come from that which seems utterly destroyed; hope can spring from what seemed only despairing; new beginnings can arise out of dead ends. And right now in our world there is so much that seems to be destroyed, despairing, and a series of dead ends. We can look at the Holy Land, we can look at our struggles; much seems broken, violent, and hopeless. *All is not well*. God's lover's quarrel with the world continues.

But this green shoot is symbolic of that Messiah to come, whom *we* recognize as Jesus. And this Messiah will be unlike so many world rulers in the past or the present. Because the Spirit of the Lord will rest upon this Messiah. This is a Spirit that will bring wisdom, understanding, counsel, might, knowledge, and the fear of the Lord. That latter phrase "fear of the Lord" would probably be better understood by us as the "respect for the Lord", or "awe of the Lord", or "a recognition of the Lord's authority and goodness." One who has a healthy fear of the Lord understands that they themselves are not the ultimate authority, that it's not all about them or their power or gain; but that the Lord has authority over them and expectations of them in their leadership or governance. Don't you wish that every world and local leader would have these kind of qualities—wisdom, knowledge, respect for God?

Furthermore, this Messiah will not make snap judgements based on shallow glances or soundbites, like we so often do. This Messiah will not blame those who are poor or struggling for their circumstances but will

instead see them through eyes of justice and righteousness. This Messiah will be clothed in relating rightly and also in faithfulness. And this Messiah will stand over against wickedness.

This description of the Messiah certainly fits Jesus of Nazareth; it also demonstrates for us what it is God values: righteousness and fairness for those poor or vulnerable; faithfulness in words and deeds, and not allowing wickedness to flourish. All of these are so desperately needed right now, aren't they?

One of the hardest things, then, for people of faith like us to understand is this: if Christ has come, then why *do* we see wickedness flourishing? And the vulnerable ravaged? And the poor humiliated? Why *is* all *still not well*? Because it isn't.

One theological concept that may be of some help here is that of "*now and not yet*". Meaning that we experience the fullness of God's goodness in Christ *now*...but also it is *not yet fully* realized. God is with us; we are saved, empowered, forgiven; but we are also still part of a broken and sinful world in which evil can be very real. That hope of God's fullness bringing deep and comprehensive peace and reconciliation remains a "*not yet*" hope. But it is a real hope for all of that. And in the "*now*" component of our present lives, we live out that hope by embodying those qualities that God values, which we saw in our lesson: wisdom, understanding, knowledge, strength, respect for God. As we do that, we become the light of Christ in a world that can be all too scary and dark. All is not yet well; true. But, as people of faith, we carry with us the hope that the medieval Christian mystic, Julian of Norwich, so famously wrote of when she said, "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well."

I know that I, for one, would like to carry that thought within me, like an inner flame of the Holy Spirit, as we continue on through this holiday season. I fully expect that the stark and glaring contrast between holiday expectations of peace on earth and grim warfare elsewhere, between holiday cheer and our own personal struggles, will continue to be on full display. *All is not well*; we know it; God knows it. And God cares and acts to make a difference. As can we. We can look to be those lights, or those "little Christs", as Luther referred to Christians. In fact, as we approach Thanksgiving this Thursday, we can appreciate the blessings we

have received, and we can *be* those blessings for others, so that they have reason to give thanks, just as we do. In our present time, all is not perfected, but there is still much that is beautiful, good, and blessed. We are privileged to experience that abundance of blessing in a part of the world that is renowned for its beauty and within a community and church that surround us with God's love. We have much for which to be thankful, and we have much we can offer back to others in return. Amen.