

“Advent Vision”

Introduction: Last week, as we recognized that Advent is to help us not only look back to the first coming of Jesus but to look forward to his return, I used the title of a song from the group, Chicago, “Does Anybody Really Know What Time it Is?” to get us thinking about the fact that while we don’t know when Jesus will come back, we know that he will, and that he calls us to be ready. The best way to be ready is to keep on living faithfully.

This morning, we will push this along a little further and consider that such faithful living hinges on our view of where we are heading. Instead of a rock group to get us thinking, here is a conversation between Alice in Wonderland and a theologian named the Cheshire Cat:

“Would you tell me please which way I ought to go from here?” asked Alice. “That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,” said the Cat. “I don’t much care where,” said Alice. “Then it doesn’t matter which way you go,” said the Cat.

Add to this wisdom from the Cat the wisdom from another theologian, Yogi Berra, who said: “If you don’t know where you are going, you’ll end up someplace else.” What we find is that our understanding of where we are going matters very much. Our vision for our future informs our way of life in the present. As a real theologian put it, our faith and love spring from the hope that we have (Col. 1:5). Do we know where we are going? Our texts for today help us with our hope as they give us a vision for what life will be like when the will of God is done, on earth as it is in heaven, everywhere, and all the time.

I. From the Stumps and Slash

A. If you’ve ever seen a plot of land that has just been subjected to the work of loggers, that gives a pretty good picture of the context into which Isaiah is speaking about our hope. As one writer puts it, Isaiah swings back and forth, like a metronome, between judgment and hope. The last two verses of chapter 10, then, sum up the judgment of God against the nations, and against his people, for their persistently prideful, arrogant, and self-centered ways. They are pictured as a large forest that needed to be cut down to size: “See, the LORD Almighty will lop off the boughs with great power. The lofty trees will be felled, the tall ones will be brought low. He will cut down the forest thickets with an ax...” No need for a chain saw and a chipper; just the LORD Almighty with an ax is enough.

B. So, when chapter 11 opens, all that is left is the mess of stumps and slash. But in the middle of the mess we see that there is still life. In the middle of the mess emerges the mercy and faithfulness of God: “A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.” Despite the failings of Israel’s human leaders, including its greatest king, David, a leader from the line of Jesse, who was King David’s father, will come. Like the trickle of water we saw in Ezekiel’s vision, which began to flow from the temple and then became a large, nourishing, and healing river which brought life to all it touched, this glimmer of mercy also begins small—a tender little shoot (a baby in a manger?!), but is promised to grow into an unparalleled leader who will reign over an expansive, marvelous kingdom.

C. Now, in its immediate, 8th c. B.C. context, the hope here is for deliverance by God of his people from the upcoming Assyrian and Babylonian conquests. But like much of OT prophecy, there is both a near future and a distant future to which it points. And this distant future is now being worked

out in and through the comings of Jesus, who is the offspring of David to whom this shoot points. As the angel tells Mary: “The Lord God will give him the throne of his father, David ...” (Lk. 1:32). As Paul declares about him at the beginning of his letter to the Romans, “who as to his earthly life was a descendent of David, and who through the Spirit of holiness was appointed the Son of God in power by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord” (Ro. 1:3-4). And he is the one who declares of himself, in the very last verses of the Bible: “I am the Root and the Offspring of David . . .” (Rev. 22:16). This tender little shoot, in other words, grows up into a glorious and fruitful branch. What, then, does Isaiah go on to tell us about the character of his rule and reign? What is the vision and the hope we are to look to and hold on to that informs our faith and our love?

II. The Ruler and His Reign

A. In words that remind us of the baptism of Jesus, when the Holy Spirit descended upon him like a dove to equip him for his ministry, we hear from Isaiah more particularly what that equipping consisted of. Isaiah names three pairs of characteristics. The first, wisdom and understanding, would enable Jesus to see what is at the heart of an issue. The second, counsel and might, would enable Jesus to take the right course of action and be able to see it through. The third, knowledge and fear of the LORD (in which he would delight), would enable him to know the will of the Father, and desire to do it, instead of seeking glory and power for himself, which seems to be the pursuit of so many of the world’s leaders.

Illustration: You may be aware of the personality tests that exist today, helping people become more self-aware. Myers Briggs is one; the Enneagram is another. These are helpful tools in that they direct you to see what are the God-given strengths of your particular character type, as well as the blind spots you have and how those blind spots have shaped you and then affect you, in both your relationship with God and with others. As we grow in such self-awareness, it can help lead us to experience spiritual and personal transformation.

Sometimes I wonder: Did Jesus have any blind spots? What would be his Myers Briggs score? What would be his Enneagram number? I’m not sure he had one, because though fully human, Jesus was also without sin. It is his image, after all, that we are seeking to reflect and restore through our own transformation.

B. Therefore, Jesus, I think we could argue from this text, is the one leader who is perfectly equipped. He had no blind spots. As he puts this equipping into practice, the text goes on to reveal that in his reign, the needy and the poor would not be overlooked, nor would the wicked survive, for bringing righteousness and justice to the surface would be his aim in all things. Moreover, a picture is painted for us of a new creation that seems to be something like a new Eden where relationships will become markedly different and transformations and reversals abound. Predators and prey would give up old hostilities and live peaceably together (v. 6). Their very nature would change as meat eaters would become vegetarians (v. 7). And children, the most vulnerable of society, would be protected and safe (v. 8). Throughout the created order, the knowledge of the Lord would prevail such that all nations would be attracted to his beauty and bow down before him.

So how is this vision of the future, this hope, to inform our faith and our love, as we live, now, today?

III. Our Faith and Love

A. To think about that, let's consider a few of Paul's concluding thoughts in the letter he wrote to the Christians in Rome. One of the things he shares with them is that everything that has been written in the past (and by that he means the OT because the NT hadn't come into being yet) was written to teach and strengthen and encourage us so that our hope might be secured. In other words, the OT provides us with the roots from which our faith has grown for what we see in the NT are the ways in which Jesus fulfills the OT promises. One of the basic promises of God is found in Genesis 12, where we read that the purpose for the formation of a people called Israel was to be, not just for their own good but for the blessing of the nations. Paul says that's just what had begun to happen in Jesus; in him the Gentiles/nations will hope (15:12).

We find ourselves surrounded by so many broken promises from our world and national leaders that it's good to have a leader that keeps his. This God is trustworthy; we can rest confidently in him. Our faith is secure. His vision of the future will come to pass. The good work he began in the world, and in us, he will bring to completion (Phil. 1:6). It is a great anchor for our faith.

B. This should affect our love as well, for in bringing the Gentiles into the family of God, Jesus was breaking down centuries of hostility. For this to happen smoothly and well, Paul is encouraging them in these closing chapters of Romans: "accept one another, then, just as Christ has accepted you" (v. 7). Extend the hospitality of Jesus as he has extended his hospitality to you. Love as you have been loved. Forgive as you have been forgiven, especially those who are markedly different from you.

Illustration: There is a Quaker painter named Edward Hicks who, in the early 19th c., spent a great deal of time dwelling on the Isaiah 11 text. From his pondering, he painted over 100 depictions, naming it, *The Peaceable Kingdom*. It is worth looking at on-line. On the painting's right side, in the foreground, Hicks has painted a group of animals with bright colors and vivid features, including a lamb hanging out with a lion and small children playing in their midst. To the left of the animals, in the background, Hicks depicts William Penn and associates making peace with a group of native Americans, almost as if they had been inspired by the vision of the peaceable gathering of animals and children.

I wonder, were he to paint such today, who would he picture as needing to reconcile and make peace with one another?

The divisions in our nation, and in our world are as deep as they've ever been. As the cover of TIME put it a few years ago, "We're not frayed at the edges—we're ripped at the damn seams" (12/11/17). With the vision of God's restored and new creation in mind, and all of the changes in relationships that we saw in Isaiah 11, can we reach out toward those who are so very different from us, in color, in gender, in religious heritage, and work toward this vision of a new heaven and a new earth? If Isaiah 11 is where we are going, if the Offspring of David is on the throne of the world, then being instruments of God's healing and grace, loving others in unexpected ways, and living faithfully in a world full of fear no matter who is in the Oval Office, seems to be the very best way to go.

