



## Sermons from First Presbyterian Church of Ann Arbor

### **“Isaiah ‘Twas Foretold It: A Glorious Stump”**

The Rev. Lawrence W. Farris

December 5, 2010

The Second Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 11.1-10 and Matthew 3.1-12

As you may know, the lectionary is that list of readings from scripture prescribed for each Sunday of the church year. For each Sunday, a reading from the Psalms, the rest of the Old Testament, the Gospels, and the rest of the New Testament are specified. The lectionary’s purpose is to take us through the most of the Bible in a systematic way over the course of three years. We preachers are free to decide whether or not we will use the readings for any given Sunday as the basis for our sermon for that day. Often we do, and sometimes, if we deem there are other texts better suited to the needs of the congregation on that particular Sunday, we don’t. Just now during the season of Advent, I have chosen to preach from the biblical texts the lectionary sets before us.

Now the lectionary pairs the passages from the Old Testament and the Gospels so that they will mutually inform one another with the intention that we will learn of God, in part, through the interplay of the two. That said, I find today’s lectionary matching of the beautiful and hopeful words of Isaiah with the harsh and vitriolic preaching of John the Baptist an odd pairing. In fact, the more I looked at these two lessons, all I seemed to be able to see were odd pairings. For example, in Isaiah, we’ve got wolves and lambs paired up, and leopards and goat kids, and lions and calves, and bears and cows, and poisonous snakes and infants. The lean and the hungry are thus paired with critters who aren’t going to be getting much sleep if they are truly together. These pairings simply do not fit our usual understanding of compatibility and safety. Furthermore, in the social realm, we’ve got the poor and meek paired up with fair and just treatment which doesn’t always happen, and which may hit our ears just a bit oddly in a time when congress is debating just tax rates for the making affluent. And we’ve got the wicked paired up with getting their just desserts, and most of us don’t have much trouble thinking of counter examples to that reality. I mean, after all, Ohio State did beat Michigan this year.

But perhaps the oddest pairing of all in these two lessons is that of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming out from Jerusalem together to go all the way down to the Jordan River to see what baptizing John is up to. For you see, the Pharisees and Sadducees, two of the major parties of Judaism at that time, have almost nothing in common except for mutual dislike of one another. The Pharisees tended to come from the lower classes, tended towards separatism when it came to the larger culture, and focused religiously on observance of the law of Moses. The Sadducees tended to come from the upper classes, were quite willing to accommodate to the larger culture, and focused religiously on the sacrifices offered at the great Jerusalem temple. So, when these two groups end up on the same side of an argument, it’s likely an example of ‘the enemy of my enemy is my friend.’

There's John baptizing away in the Jordan River when he looks up and sees the Pharisees and Sadducees standing on the bank. The translation we read suggests they were there to get baptized themselves. It's possible. Maybe they figure it's safer to stay on the good side, at least publicly, of someone as powerfully prophetic as John. But other translations work differently with the somewhat ambiguous Greek in which Matthew is written to suggest that the Pharisees and Sadducees came to investigate what John was doing or even to oppose him.

Whatever their motivation, before they can speak up, John stops his work and greets the religious authorities with a cheery, "You bunch of snakes! Who told you to come? Just trying to save your own skins, are you? Well, like everyone else, you better shape up and bear the fruit that marks a penitent life." I imagine the crowds watching and listening are astonished to hear anyone speak to the pious and the mighty this way. No one talks to Pharisees and Sadducees this way, that is, unless they wish to be shunned, excommunicated or worse. But John is relentless. Anticipating that the Pharisees and Sadducees are going to pull out their credentials and pedigrees to deflect his wrath, John says, "And don't stand there and tell me you're the children of Abraham and Sarah. God can make children out of rocks, friends, or have you been ensconced in your piety and privilege so long you've dismissed the power of God. The ax is right by the tree that is you, boys, ready to take you down to a stump faster than you can say Paul Bunyan."

It is not recorded how the Pharisees and Sadducees responded on that day. But the gospel tells that it is not long before John is no longer counted among the living. A prophet's popularity is often fleeting, and prophets are vulnerable when the crowds' attention turns elsewhere.

The world is often divided. In Isaiah's time, it was divided between the conquering armies of Assyria and the defeated people of Jerusalem, whose royal family line that began with King David's father Jesse has been cut down like a stump. In John the Baptist's time, the world of Judaism was divided between the sinners, those deemed unclean, who flocked to John because they heard hope within his fiery rhetoric, and the self-identified righteous those deemed clean, who were confident they did not stand in need of repentance. The world is often divided between the haves and have nots, the healthy and the sick, the insiders and those looking in, the powerful and the powerless, the predators and the prey.

And there are seasons of life when life resembles nothing so much as a clear-cut field where only tree stumps remain. So it was in Isaiah's time, and so it was in John's time as he cleared the way so that people could clearly see the unexpected Messiah who was coming. Neither for Isaiah nor for John was it business as usual. Circumstances were dire. Change was in the wind, big time. Sometimes a very great deal must be cleared away in our lives for us to be able to see hope clearly. It takes an attentive eye to see hope in a small green shoot pushing up out of a stump and a keen ear to hear the hope in John's words.

And then there's this business of snakes. I'm willing to bet that the Pharisees and Sadducees knew their book of Genesis well enough to know that when John called them snakes, they were being likened to a less than desirable character in the Garden of Eden narrative. They were not flattered. But

in Isaiah, snakes are the playmates of children, as if to say even snakes are not beyond redemption, maybe not even Pharisees and Sadducees. In the kingdom of God, at the foot of the cross, there is no V.I.P. section, no preferred seating, just level ground where all are welcome.

But it is important that we note there are some not so odd pairs in the passage from Isaiah. The words of this prophet soar and sing:

A shoot shall come forth from the stump of Jesse, and a branch grow out  
of his roots. The spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him,  
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,  
the spirit of counsel and might,  
the spirit of knowledge and fear of the Lord.

Now those are some pairs we can easily comprehend. And those are paired qualities we behold in the one we call Lord and Savior, even Jesus the Christ. It is in Christ that we behold the intention of God in fullness. Only in Christ can we envision a time when justice in the social and political realm will be paired with such harmony in the natural realm that no longer shall their be predator and prey, where our children, all children, will be utterly safe. Do we not long for that future and turn to Christ to show us the way towards it? Can we thus grasp why John is so insistent in preparing the way of the Lord? Can we thus grasp why John calls all people to turn in repentance from anything that distracts from Isaiah's glorious vision? Some see only a stump. And some see the glory of God.

In a few moments we will take to ourselves another pair, that of bread and cup, at this table. We name this pair the body and blood of Christ, the bread of heaven and the cup of salvation. As we take this pair to ourselves this day, let us do so thankfully -remembering these are gifts of Christ, and prayerfully - committing ourselves to the vision to which he calls us, now and always. So, let us all come. Let everyone come. Come weighed down and set free. Come wolf and lamb. Come strong and weak. Come leopard and kid. Come young child and mature adult. Come lion and calf. Come healed and grieving. Come Pharisee and Sadducee. Come cow and bear. Come infant and snake. Come past and future. Come receive bread; come receive cup. But surely, come.

Amen +

\*\*\*\*\*

---

—  
Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation, the written accounts occasionally stray from proper grammar and punctuation.

Copyright ©2010 by Lawrence Farris. All rights reserved. These sermon manuscripts are intended for personal use only and may not be republished or used in any way without the permission of the author.