

Second Sunday of Advent, Year A
December 4, 2022
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St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, Wisconsin

Texts referenced: Isaiah 11:1-10, Romans 15:4-13, Matthew 3:1-12

Friends, in this holly jolly season of advent, I want to note that in two weeks our Gospel will be about the angel of the Lord announcing Jesus as Emmanuel to Joseph. In one week, we will hear of how Jesus comes to bring hope to the poor and sick. This week however, John says of the coming Christ, "His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

I will also note that our head rector, Ian, is conveniently out of town and is thus not available to preach this lovely text in our yuletide season. Please remind me to thank him for that.

Despite how easily the theme of hellfire has been used in connection to this passage, a theme I'm not terribly fond of, in truth, this is a good text to be mindful of as we get ready Christmas. Though I do struggle to reconcile John the Baptist's words with the rest of the season. It's particularly interesting when we have John effectively proclaiming "happy Advent you brood of vipers" right next to some of the most calming and soothing words of scripture that speak to the appeal of the Silent Nights of the Christmas Season.

As Christians, we connect the words of Isaiah from the Hebrew Bible to the birth of Christ. And from them we hear, "The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them."

The whole notion of these words is that there will be peace. And yet I find it hard to reconcile these words with John's threat of the winnowing fork. In the season proclaimed as one of peace, where do we find space for these different ideas?

Some of you may be aware that I've conveniently left out that part of Isaiah where he says of the shoot from Jesse's tree, that is Jesus, "the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked." Again, thanks, Ian. But I think this intense language does have a connection as important to Christmas as that promise of peace.

This intensity from Isaiah and John the Baptist must have a place in Christmas because that violent imagery was infuriatingly and sadly in their lives as well as our own. As Isaiah promises that God will judge and meet with equity the poor and meek, as John denounced the righteousness of the Pharisees and Sadducees who hid their misdeeds behind their flaunted superiority, we live in a world where still people are hurt and struggle for peace and security.

Not long ago over dinner, some students talked about how they as members of Gen-Z, felt as though they have never felt entirely safe as they discussed what different active shooter drills from school felt like growing up. A man came up to me grieving a job he had lost recently, a strange circumstance as that same company posted record profits.

I suspect some of you might have a story or two to tell in which you have been made unsafe or afraid or were made to feel small. Or foolish. Or valueless. By an insurance company, by an employer, perhaps even by someone close to you.

And Isaiah and John's intensity remind us that those who are hurt by injustice are not invisible to God and that injustice does not go unnoticed. They remind us that silent night that we'll remember in four weeks' time was made for everyone. That when we come to that manger to see the king of kings lying in a trough, before him we can bring whatever we carry. The hopes and fears of all our years will be met in him that night.

John and Isaiah remind us today that it doesn't matter what you may carry, you are welcome in that manger just as you are welcome at this table. You can bring trauma and hurt and know that God denounces the injustices that made it happen. You can bring repentance if you know you've been unjust and made mistakes but want to be better. And though I've been really fixating on that intensity John has in attack that brood of viperish Sadducees and Pharisees and everything wrapped up in that, I hope that you can bring with you through this advent and on Christmas day what brings you life and joy! Family and friends and love. They'll remain nameless for the moment but I got to watch the most recent WWE Survivor Series professional wrestling pay-per-view event with a couple of folks from the parish and it was so much fun. You better believe I'm bringing joy I got from that night with me through advent.

Bring whatever you carry, even if it's heavy and hard, before God, because that peace God envisions is meant for everyone. It is meant for you.