

Advent 2—Year A
Isaiah 11:1-10
Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19
Romans 15:4-13
Matthew 3:1-12

I love Advent. I love everything about this season. I love the brilliance of the blue. I love the light of the candles that builds little by little. I love the simpler settings to our service music and the beauty of plainsong. I love the stillness and the quiet; that sense of expectancy and waiting and anticipation; a time pregnant with possibility. I love how radically countercultural it is. Amidst the busyness in the run up to Christmas; amidst all the activity that seems to descend upon us in these weeks of December, Advent proclaims, *“Not so fast. Slow down. Just be.”* I love the invitation “to just be.”

But Advent is complex and today’s lessons remind us that there is another energy to this season; a much more uneasy, uncomfortable energy; a much more active energy. Today, we get the prophetic energy of Advent. Have you ever met a prophet who was still? Nope. Prophets are the embodiment of “doing” energy; they are about doing the hard work that Advent also sets before us.

The **Collect** makes plain that it is actually an act of mercy that **God sends us these messengers called the prophets**. Do you know who else are messengers of God? The angels. Prophets as angels? Not sure I like where this is going. And in this act of mercy, **God sends these messenger prophets to preach repentance**, which can take us in a couple of directions. At a minimum, this is a call to stop and examine where we are, how we’re thinking, how we’re living, and where we might need a course correction. It’s an invitation to ponder where we are out of alignment with God as we keep moving through this horizontal plane of time and space, and to make adjustments, to move back into alignment. Richard Rohr would remind us that *repentance* comes from the word *metanoia* and actually means to “*go beyond the mind*” or “*go into the larger mind*.” Where has our mind become too small, too narrow, too rigid, too dug in, and what would it look like to “**put on the mind of Christ**,” as Paul says? Repentance is spiritual spadework.

But repentance is never to be an exercise in self-flagellation—that perspective is still coming from our small mind. Remember, repentance is a means of mercy to **prepare the way for our salvation**, in the Greek, to prepare the way for our *“healing and wholeness.”*

The warnings of these messenger prophets are like the flashing lights that we’re getting in the danger zone, that our sins—our things done and left undone, our patterns and behaviors and perspectives, our words and deeds—these are blocking the flow of love. We do want to **heed these warnings**; we do want to **forsake these sins**, turn away from them, shed them; we do want clear these blocks so that we are free to **greet with joy the coming of Jesus** who shows us what is possible when we’re aligned and living fully in the flow of this love. *Again, there is an active energy to this work of Advent.*

And our lessons today let us know just how deep we're going to have to dig in this spiritual spadework. **Isaiah** gives us this image of a **shoot coming out of the stump of Jesse**, tells us of a **branch that grows out of his roots**. Oh, this is hopeful! As we are doing this work of repentance, we can wonder what's left within us to build upon. **Isaiah** would remind us, "*No, no, no, it's okay if we're starting with the stump. It's okay if we're all the way down to the roots. Life can grow from that place. In fact, maybe we need to get to that place for the new possibilities to really have a chance to sprout.*"

This stump/root place is a creative space. This is the place where the **spirit of the Lord** can rest and infuse this new life with **wisdom and understanding**, can balance **counsel with power**, can see how **knowledge and awe** dance together. From this stump/root place, a new capacity grows, the capacity **not to judge by what the eyes see or decide by what the ears hear**, but instead stay curious and **see with the eyes of the heart and hear the deeper longings that reverberate in those sighs too deep for words that is the native tongue of the Spirit**.

From this stump/root place, we learn the power of **righteousness**, of **alignment with God and God's longings for this world**, where all who should be **enemies live in peace**, and where that peace is far more attractive than the retribution we so often seek. And once you catch that vision, all the **hurting and destroying loses its appeal**. **Isaiah** tells us that this **root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; nations shall inquire about him**. Oh, we miss this all the time. We think it's the grand and spectacular that appeals, but **it's the root**, it's always the **root**, that is deeply satisfying and about which others are so curious. It's the **root** that sustains in season, and out. It's actually **the stump, the root, that shines with glory and bids us come**.

So, if this Advent soul work takes you down to the stump, down to the root, that is the best possible place to look for the shoots of truly new life.

And if the stump/root image doesn't make clear how deep we've got to go, **John the Baptist** from today's gospel will make sure we get it. It won't be **our religious pedigree or status that save us; it won't be how much we know or the quality of our practices**. Nope, it will be the **yearning** that is so done with all the things that promise us the good life but never feed our deep soul hunger; it will be the **yearning** that is so done with staying on the surface that we are willing to **keep seeking for the Source**, even if it means **listening to a guy in camel's hair who eats locusts**, even if it means **confessing** those things that are in **getting in our way of drinking from that well**. It will be our **willingness to let Jesus have his way with us with a winnowing fork, shaking us up, sifting and sorting us out, pulling what is good and lifegiving deeper into him, collecting up our chaff and burning it away until it truly is now more**.

Again, not the still, contemplative vibe we normally associate with Advent, but a much more active tumultuous one.

But in the end, **this path of repentance truly is the way of mercy**. How can we **welcome this new life** that is coming if we do not first **make space**? How do we experience the **unexpected shoot of new life** that grows out of what looks dead if we don't get **taken down to the stump**? How can we catch the **vision of the peaceable kingdom** if we don't **get back to the root** that

can see beyond the world as we know it? How will we ever be ready to **steward the power of the Holy Spirit if we don't let Jesus burn off our chaff first?**

Advent *isn't* just about preparing for the birth of Jesus; it's about **getting our house in order to welcome the fullness of God into our being, not as a Christmas guest, but as a fulltime resident.**

Today's lessons remind us that we've got a fair amount of work to do to get ready, and we will need all the help we can get, even **the angels with a prophetic edge.** Amen.

The Rev. Cynthia K. R. Banks
St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Boone, NC
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