

We're Not Ready (and That's OK) — Second Sunday of Advent

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[Isaiah 11:1-10](#)

[Romans 15:4-13](#)

[Matthew 3:1-12](#)

Once again in our lessons this morning on this Second Sunday of the Advent Season we have a whole bunch of swirling and interlocking images from Scripture.

From the prophet Isaiah, again, we have hopeful images of the king of Israel and Judah. This oracle from Isaiah came at a time many generations after King David. Jesse, as in the stump of Jesse, was David's father. And they were waiting for a good king to finally come back, to save them from foreign powers, and inner turmoil and corruption. Again, like last Sunday, here the ideal king doles out God's amazing justice. And God's amazing justice is a Word—"he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked."

And when the whole world is full of the knowledge of God, full of God's Word, then an incredible peace will come. Isaiah says, "With righteousness [the new king] shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth." And even more, Isaiah writes, even animals—who we would say are naturally prone to devouring and destroying each other will be peaceable.

Isaiah sees in his vision that the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea. And, in a way, Isaiah is saying, what we think is natural: death, war, violence and injustice—these are not the intended state of things. But there will be a day when God will come, and these things will pass away.

And, actually, the prophet Isaiah shows up twice more in our lessons today. St. Paul quotes from the Greek version of this same passage from Isaiah in his letter to the believers in Rome. And the gospel writer Matthew tells us that John the Baptizer is the fulfillment of another Isaian quotation, from chapter 40, "Prepare the way of the Lord/ make his paths straight."

And so, I was looking into these little verses from the 40th chapter of Isaiah as well. And these compared with Isaiah 11 bring up the same kind of tension we heard last Sunday. Is it the nations, the whole world, and us too, that needs to journey, to move themselves, to go on a pilgrimage to God?

Like Isaiah says here: On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall *inquire of him*, and his *dwelling* shall be glorious. Do the people move?

Or—*Is it God who is on the move?*

Last week we heard Jesus say the Son of Man would come to us in the last days. And here, at the beginning of Matthew's Gospel, we also hear of God moving. When I went and did a little digging, I found that, while Isaiah's prophecy about the stump or root of Jesse is hopeful, nothing too terrible had befallen the people yet at that time, and they were hoping for protection.

But the prophecy about the "way of the Lord" was hopeful in a very different way. At *that* point the people's hopes had already been dashed. Their temple and their way of life had been destroyed by the Babylonians. They had been taken through the desert, from Judah to Babylon as captives.

And in chapter 40, there, Isaiah sees a vision of God in a holy, heavenly throne room talking to his angelic host. God says, "Hey, all you messengers, go send the message: Get ready for me to come!" And by saying "Prepare a way, a straight path," Isaiah is poking fun at the Babylonians. The Babylonian religion had specific rituals where they would decorate roads for their gods to travel on when the gods would come at different times of the year out from their seasonal hibernations.

Now, God is saying: "Here I come. Prepare a way for me!" Notice that it is God who is on the move to rescue God's people, here.

So, what does this all mean?

Well, many of the more astute theologians among you will be thinking—What does it matter where God moves and whatever, isn't God everywhere at once? The answer of course is, yes. But Scripture does not work in principles, and proofs and theories like that. Scripture tells stories, and paints pictures. And from these stories today, the image that rises to the top is that: **God moves, and we get ready.**

This was our theme last week. It's our theme again. We now are anticipating the celebration of God coming on Christmas, God comes at the Table and through the Word of Scripture on Sundays, God will come at the very end. And the only way, we confess, that we *can get* ready, is to admit we're not—admit that we're not ready: a funny sort of paradox.

We, ourselves, can do nothing to get closer to God. As St. Paul writes earlier in his letter to the Romans: "both Jews and Greeks are under the power of sin, 'There is no one who is righteous, not even one.'" Reminding God's people of this reality, is what John the Baptizer is up to.

Speaking of swirling and interlocking images, here in Matthew, John the Baptizer is dressed up like the Old Testament prophet Elijah, out in the wilderness near the Jordan River, where the people of old crossed into the land promised to Abraham. And John is telling the people to repent, to change their minds, to confess their sins, to admit they are messed up, and try again. This is what Matthew tells us Isaiah meant when he prophesied about making straight the paths.

And this is why John the Baptizer is so hard on the Pharisees and the Sadducees. They were by no means allies, these two groups. They were from different regions and different flavors of the Hebrew religion. But both had some power, and thought they were in the right. And John says to them—the same as John says to contemporary Pharisees and Sadducees, which are Lutherans and Evangelicals and Roman Catholics and etc.—Johns says: "Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham."

Which means, don't think you're ready by default. You *have* to admit you're not. You *have* to be willing and able to fail, in order to see God's coming as a refreshing mercy and not a burning terror.

One of our intrepid church-goers here at Christ the Good Shepherd was giving me some feedback about my sermon from last Sunday. And last Sunday we had another kind of vision of peace from Isaiah. All the nations, the peoples of the world, are taught by God's Word, in Isaiah's oracle, and having been taught they destroy their weapons. And this intrepid church-goer here said: there's no way that would ever happen today. No one country, no individual really, could ever trust their enemy enough to disarm themselves for real.

And that very sense of mistrust, of fear, this person said, is what keeps all the arms and gun manufacturers in business! **We're not ready for God's peace.** God's peace, we think, destroys our future, it ruins our ability to be right to protect ourselves, to be just in our own eyes, to be in control of our destinies. And admitting that we're not ready, it is the best thing, the only thing, we can do.

We are not perfect, **but the God who became flesh is.**

We are lost, **but our God is a God who loves finding.**

Amen.