

“Learning to Dream Again”

Advent 2A-19

Isaiah 11: 1-10

Matthew 3: 1-12

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“Learning to Dream Again”

It probably won't surprise you to hear there's a lot I like about Advent. I love the light(s), the music, the (wreath) decorations—the tree, the banner.

I love the theology of Advent. I love its call to look back at God's first incarnation in Jesus Christ and all it says that God loves us enough to come to us... to live with us... and for us.

And I appreciate Advent's insistent reminder that God isn't done yet—not with us or our world.

Truth be told, I *need* Advent, and the way it keeps on, year in and year out, confronting us with the truth that just as God came once, God will come again to fulfill God's will for all of creation.

But I also gotta admit, for quite a few years now—at least a decade or more—I haven't really enjoyed “preaching” Advent. I realize you might not want to hear your preacher say that on the second Sunday of Advent and all. But it's true.

It just seems to be getting old, you know... trying to find a fresh message to preach amid a season of prophecies that never seem to change. I mean, it doesn't matter what year of the lectionary we're in. Every year, Advent insists on greeting us with the same two prophets: Isaiah and John the Baptist. And every year, Isaiah and John proclaim, essentially, the same thing.

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As Joel introduced last week, the beginning of Isaiah's prophecy occurs after the kingdom of Israel split in half. There's the Northern Kingdom of Israel, and the Southern Kingdom of Judah.

Isaiah's prophecy takes place in the Southern Kingdom, and it begins with *judgment*. Fierce, harsh, even violent judgment. Isaiah warns Israel that bad, violent forces are headed for them. They're gonna be cut off. The Assyrians will cut them off from the North. The Babylonians are coming from the east. The Egyptians are already to their south, while the Mediterranean Sea's on their west. Isaiah makes clear, Israel is becoming increasingly powerless and inconsequential. They will be a people surrounded by much mightier and more prosperous empires who will do them whatever they please. Worst of all, though, there's nothing Israel they could do about it. Nowhere to run. No place to hide.

How's that for a nice Advent how-do-you-do?

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Meanwhile, John the Baptist's message doesn't “sound” much better. “Repent, people of God!” John yelled. “The kingdom of heaven has come near! Repent!”

Every time I read about John I can't help but picture the guy on a city corner standing on a milkcrate using a megaphone to scream judgment and accusations against people.

“God is coming for you,” John warns. “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.”

Geeze Louise, John! Happy Advent to you, too!

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Sometimes I think, amid Isaiah’s gloom and doom and John’s ranting and raving, it’s a wonder any of us come to worship at all during Advent.

But here’s the thing... even those messages—Isaiah’s prophecy of judgment and John’s call to repentance—even those aren’t what make Advent hard to preach year in and year out. No.

It’s what comes *after* the judgment is pronounced... *after* the call the repentance is made.

You see, in our lesson from Isaiah this morning, there actually is no judgment. That’s already been given. Instead, what we find here in chapter 11 is promise. Beautiful, life-giving promise!

While Christians often look back at Isaiah 11 and see a prophecy of Jesus the Christ, when Isaiah talks of a shoot coming out of the stump that runs back through the lineage of the great King David, he’s not actually talking about your and my notion of a Christian Messiah. He’s foretelling a new leader for the nation of Israel. A new leader who will restore Israel from a puny almost-nothing-nation under the thumb of surrounding empires, to a great light among all the world’s nations.

Isaiah is saying God will one-day send Israel a leader who won’t rule their nation like a power-hungry king or military general who leads by force, but that God would give Israel an altogether different kind of ruler who will lead Israel in an altogether different way.

Unlike the rest of the world’s leaders, Isaiah promises Israel a leader who’ll actually fear and serve the Lord their God. This leader won’t make hasty or thoughtless decisions based on selfish interests, but will make prayerful decision based on the breath of Spirit.

When this happens, according to Isaiah, the wicked will feel as though they’ve been struck down—because their self-centered way of life will be no more.¹

And not just that. When this leader finally takes the reigns of Israel, it won’t just be Israel who’s blessed. No. Isaiah says the entire world who will be blessed as all—the world in its totality—will come to know the Lord, and the Lord’s blessings—through Israel.

So when all this happens... when this new leader comes... Isaiah says there will be peace and security for all. Peace and security we can scarcely fathom. Such radical, incomprehensible peace and security that even the creatures of predator and prey— wolf and lamb, calf and lion— will all lie down together. Each and all will seek peace not just for themselves... but for the other. Not just their own security and comfort... but security and comfort for the one they don’t know... for the ones they have nothing to do with... for the ones that the world says they should oppose. True... real... peace and security for all.

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¹ Casey Thornburgh Sigmon, Commentary on Isaiah 11: 1-10,
http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4316

Now, First Isaiah prophesied around 700 B.C. That's over 2,700 years ago.

And the world is *still* as violent as ever, is it not? Maybe not in the same ways, but we're still just as violent.

So let me ask you, can *you* picture the world of peace and security to which Isaiah points? Not a world of peace and security for *some*, but a world of peace and security for *all*?

Can you picture *that* world right now? A world in which the powerless and penniless know true security? A world in which impoverished children amid the fields and plains of southern Asia or central Africa can see past the prison of their poverty unlike anything we can fathom?

Can you see a world in which our inner-city children can play in the streets without fear of gun violence? Or a world in which our inner-city, impoverished youth can picture a future gleaming with peace and prosperity amid a system so stacked against them?

Let me ask you. Can you picture the world in which world leaders put their own nations interests aside, to help improve the lives of not just some or a select group... but all those in need throughout the world?

Can you picture even our own national leaders putting aside their desire for re-election in order to do what they most earnestly believe is the best thing for the common good and for creation—not the wealthy or the powerful or the special interests, but the common good... which includes the least and the last... the marginalized and the forgotten?

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We Christians as a whole look back in Isaiah chapter 11 and see Jesus Christ as this very leader... and yet... Jesus Christ came once already. And our world *still* suffers devastating physical and economic violence. There is still so much that is wrong... so much that is broken within our world... our nation... our community... our homes... our lives.

So what do we do year in and year out when our Advent passage from Isaiah ends as it does today, proclaiming, "They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain..." "They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain."

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I'll be honest. There are days I struggle to see it. This vision Isaiah paints of a world in which economic and social and physical violence cease. There are even days I struggle to believe it—the promise that our best days are yet to come. Days when we all—from the queer teen terrified of coming out to a widowed, impoverished Yemeni woman devoid of power—live in security and peace.

I *want* it. I do. I want it enough to *wish* for it.

But do I have the faith to *hope* for it? Do I have the faith to *dream* about it?

It's a crucial question. Choosing to dream for something, rather than merely wish. As Joel said *so* well last week amid a point he attributed to Brian McLaren, there really is a difference the size of an ocean between what we dream about and simply wish for.

Joel explained that if he *wished* to run a marathon, all he would have to do is go to the starting line of a marathon and start running. I'm sure he'd get a good bit further than I would, but after a while, he'd keel over, unable finish it.

But if he truly hoped to run a marathon, if he dreamed about becoming a marathoner, then he wouldn't just show up one day at a marathon and expect it to all go ducky. No. If it was really his hope and dream, then he'd *prepare* for it. He'd *train* for it. He'd meticulously *practice* and engage in the discipline of running, so that when he finally went to run in a marathon, he'd be able to finish it and lay claim to a new truth—he ran a marathon.

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We were talking about exactly this—the difference between what we wish for and what we dream about—over beers and sodas and chips at the Men's Group gathering this past Sunday night. And someone raised what I found to be a profound point. He said, "You know, while Advent calls us to dream, I find that as I've gotten older it's become harder for me to dream."

Have you experienced that truth? As you get older, is it harder for you to dream? Not in the sense of dreaming while you sleep, but dreaming for the future... hoping and so dreaming some great goal... some deep hope into reality?

His comment hit me like a ton of bricks as I realized how true that was for me.

It helped me see how, like an atrophied muscle, if we don't practice hope, if we don't treat hope as a discipline to practice, we slowly lose the ability to do it. So if we don't regularly engage the discipline of dreaming, we gradually get less and less comfortable doing it... which helped me see why I've become less and less comfortable preaching about it.

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So this year, friends, I'm here to tell you, very much firsthand, how much I—and I suspect you, too—need John the Baptist this Advent, and his annual reminder to, 'Repent!' Repent not in the sense of refraining from things you shouldn't do... but repent in the sense of turning... shifting... changing your perspective to see what God would have us do.

"Repent!" John says. "The Kingdom of Heaven has come near! Can you see it?"

"Repent and wipe those scales from your eyes.

"Repent and move your body until your perspective changes.

"Repent and look not at what has always been... Repent, people of faith, and see once more what can still be!"

Repent of the notion that dreams are just for children.

Repent of the notion that your hopes are too naïve.

Repent of the pessimism that violence will have the last word.

Repent of the belief that God can't, that God won't, that God isn't already seeking to use you and this very community to help establish peace and security for more and more people.

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It's Isaiah's annual reminder to "dream." Along with John's urgent Advent cry: "Look, people of God! Look! And hope! And repent of the notion that you can't dream and work possibility into reality."

With Christ as our light and the Spirit our breath, we can. And by the grace of God we will.

Happy Advent. Amen.