

The Sunday Missive – December 4, 2022

The Second Sunday in Advent

Hymn 616 Hail to the Lord's Anointed

Hail to the Lord's Anointed, great David's greater Son!
Hail, in the time appointed, his reign on earth begun!
He comes to break oppression, to set the captive free;
To take away transgression, and rule in equity.

He comes with succor speedy to those who suffer wrong,
To help the poor and needy, and bid the weak be strong;
To give them songs for sighing, their darkness turn to light,
Whose souls, condemned and dying, were precious in his sight.

He shall come down like showers upon the fruitful earth,
And love, joy, hope, like flowers, spring in his path to birth;
Before him on the mountains shall peace, the herald, to;
And righteousness in fountains from hill to valley flow.

O'er every foe victorious, he on his throne shall rest,
From age to age more glorious, all blessing and all blest;
The tide of time shall never his covenant remove;
His name shall stand for ever, his changeless name of Love.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l6dGmfAL5DY>

The Collect of the Day

Merciful God, who sent your messengers the prophets to preach repentance and prepare the way for our salvation: Give us grace to heed their warnings and forsake our sins, that we may greet with joy the coming of Jesus Christ our Redeemer; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

Isaiah 11:1-10

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

His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins.

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 cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.

They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. 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.

Psalm 72

Give the rulers your justice, O God* ***And your righteousness to the powerful***

That they may rule your people righteously* ***And care for the poor with justice.***

That the mountains may bring prosperity to the people* ***And all the little hills bear righteousness.***

Let them defend the needy among the people* ***Rescue the poor and crush the oppressor.***

Then they shall live as long as the sun and moon endure* ***From one generation to another.***

They shall come down like rain upon the mown field* ***Like showers that water the earth.***

In their time shall the righteous flourish* ***There shall be abundance of peace till the moon shall be no more.***

Romans 15:4-13

Whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope. May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written,

"Therefore I will confess you among the Gentiles, and sing praises to your name"; and again he says, "Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people"; and again, "Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples praise him"; and again Isaiah says, "The root of Jesse shall come, the one who rises to rule the Gentiles; in him the Gentiles shall hope."

Now, may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Hymn 75 There's a voice in the wilderness crying

There's a voice in the wilderness crying, a call from the ways untrod:
Prepare in the desert a highway, a highway for our God!

The valleys shall be exalted, the lofty hills brought low;
Make straight all the crooked places where the Lord our God may go!

O Zion, that bringest good tidings, get thee up to the heights and sing!

Proclaim to a desolate people the coming of their King.
Like the flowers of the field they perish, like grass our works decay,
The power and pomp of nations shall pass like a dream away;

But the word of our God endureth, the arm of the Lord is strong;
He stands in the midst of nations, and he will right the wrong.
He shall feed His flock like a shepherd, the lambs he'll gently hold;
To pastures of peace he'll lead them, and bring them safe to his fold.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mA73oyWm5gg>

Matthew 3:1-12

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'"

Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. 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. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

"I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his

sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 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.”

Aim First, Stump Later – Advent 2A

“A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots,” prophesies Isaiah, “the spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge. And his delight shall be in the Lord.” At first glance, we can remember the offshoot of Jesse was his son, David, the greatest of all the kings of the Israelites.

Trouble is, the series of prophets we know as Isaiah lived hundreds of years after David lived and died. So – as with all wisdom – they must have been commenting on history and contemporary events as well as predicting the future. The history Isaiah takes on for a subject had already taken on legendary proportions, thus we are gifted with one of the most brilliantly instructive examples of the power of story to move and form us. He extracts future meaning from re-examined past. As with every good thing: it is wise if we have ears to hear it.

Stories begin when something happens and somebody talks about it afterwards with varying degrees of factual accuracy. Always, the teller of the story has a purpose in the telling. The most powerful stories of all result in religious belief. In religion, we who tell stories to one another do so because the foundational stories have convinced us we must. Here in this place, we sing and pray and think and talk about the stories of Jesus because they make us feel like we must; they beg our retelling. This experience is what Paul calls “joy and peace in believing.” Christ has died; Christ is risen; Christ will come again.

The stories of religion, sacred texts, are said to have special power to move and form us. We are moved to take certain actions, both in worship and daily life, and we consider ourselves to be in formation, ‘works in progress’ (aka, sinners) throughout our lives. If we have ‘ears to hear,’ which is to say, if we have a willing heart, we will always be growing spiritual beings. Our religion talks with us about the

meaning of life, what we are, how we got here, where we're going, and what we're supposed to do in the meantime.

So, we can conclude that Isaiah's prediction included the news that the shoot in question, coming out of the stump of Jesse, and with all those magnificent qualities, had not yet come, was yet to come, was not David. In case we needed more convincing, the name 'Jesse' means 'King,' whereas 'David,' more or less: 'Beloved Uncle.'

It seems as if the story couldn't have been about David, at least not early on. Once he beat out his seven brothers for the kingship, his legend became glorious and sacred, but, at first his actions were far from Isaiah's description of a righteous fellow. But it was about him, in the sense that he moved from his early character towards being a more just, righteous and godly ruler and man. He changed. And the story was also about the ruler longed for in Isaiah's day. Could it be that he was writing about all people everywhere: anybody who has power over another living being? Every one of us, our purpose is to lay aside the deeds of evil and change for the better, whether we are signing a treaty, or looking for a parking space? We all must look for peace wherever we can find it, and treat each other the way we would like to be treated.

We believe it was Jesus who fully lived like this, who proved that such perfection exists, and who promised that each of us will attain it when we die trying. More than once this season we will reiterate our narrative and musical descriptions of a life we know of that was wholly dedicated to peace on earth, mercy and mildness, with goodness and all sinners reconciled; who had glory and to spare, but mildly lay it by. Because that birth proves we can have a second, spiritual birth and rise above our crueller natures and, in so doing, no more may we die, forever.

"Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins," declares the prophet. What marketing! OMG I want those now, and I will go online and order them the minute I can get to my phone. Seriously, who would not want a belt of righteousness around the waist and of faithfulness around the loins? We sing for joy, and next week when we light the rose candle, the candle that says, *Gaude!*, Rejoice! We declare that such a life is

possible. And we laugh out loud when we know that it is what we want.

Jesse was the grandson of Ruth and of Boaz. Remember Ruth immigrated from Moab to Judea with Naomi and stayed after their local husbands died. Because her actions in so doing went against accepted and expected practice, her story serves to illustrate that love and loyalty come to a people from unexpected and diverse sources. As in so much of Jesus' teaching, it is the stranger, the marginalized, the woman who brings creativity, compassion and spiritual progress to the mix.

So Jesse was a product of this truth, the truth of Ruth, if you will. He was born in Bethlehem, into what had become a prosperous family of the tribe of Judah, a farmer, breeder and owner of sheep; a prominent resident of the town of Bethlehem. He was important to us not because he was a king, but because he produced them. Good rulers can come from anywhere. He was just a regular person.

As the story goes, the prophet Samuel asked Jesse to present his seven sons for possible kingship. When Samuel saw the eldest, Eliab, he was impressed by his stature and convinced he must be God's anointed king. But God said to Samuel, Nope. "Do not consider his appearance or his height; I have rejected him. The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart." When Jesse presented his second son, Abinadab, God told Samuel, "The Lord has not chosen this one either." You see where this is going. All the sons were rejected. Finally, Jesse told Samuel that David, the eighth and youngest didn't count; he was out tending the flocks and too young to be considered. Of course, ole Sam the prophet asked for the young lad to be called in from over yonder, and the rest is history. Isaiah reiterates: the shoot will have spirit, knowledge and delight in the Lord, and like God, will not judge by what the eyes see, or the ears hear but deal righteousness to the poor, and equitable treatment to the meek of the earth.

At the very least we have an allegory for character development here: The ruler of one's heart must be the one chosen after all the ego, the glamour, the hierarchy, the power and the stuff have been rejected,

turned aside and removed. Then we will be left with the part of ourselves worth anointing and feeding all our days.

He goes on to spin an irresistable futuristic fable: “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, etc. etc. In other words, violence will disappear even from nature, where it’s nobody’s fault, That’s the Kingdom of Heaven.

At the very least, Isaiah is telling us that the only way to have a peaceful world is for humans to reprioritize themselves and serve the better angels of our nature. Only if we get better at being human, can there be less violence in the world. We are not merely meant to enjoy Creation, we are meant to care for it.

Remember T. H. White’s *The Man who Would be King*, the magnificent retelling of ancient Britain’s legend of Arthur and Merlyn and Lancelot and Guenevere and Sir Galahad, whom everyone disliked for being so good. Everyone’s favorite part, *The Sword in the Stone*, chronicles Arthur's upbringing and initial training by Merlyn, the wizard who lives through time backwards. Already knowing the boy's destiny, Merlyn teaches Arthur to be a good king by turning him into various kinds of animals: fish, hawk, ant, goose, and badger, each one providing a lesson that an arrogant human being could not absorb.

Merlyn also instills in Arthur the belief that there is no justifiable reason for war and that so far in history, human governments and powerful people have only manifested the worst results of rule by the powerful, and Arthur must be different. Likewise, says Isaiah, the true ruler “will not hurt or destroy anyone or anything on all my holy mountain; and then the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. And on that day, the nations will once again inquire of him, and he will deserve a glorious dwelling.”

When we sing Psalm 72, the same desire is fervently expressed: “May the King treat your people with righteousness and your poor with justice. And then the mountains and hills will yield prosperity for the people. Let the King defend the poor, give deliverance to the needy, and crush any oppressor. Then – and only then -- may he live while the sun endures, and as long as the moon. For then, and only then, he will

be like rain that falls, like showers that water the earth, and in those days will righteousness flourish and peace abound, until the moon is no more.

It goes on. The description of a good ruler is clear, as in Isaiah, and indeed no matter where we turn in Holy Scripture. God is not impressed with worldly power or riches or influence or pride. God desires humility, charity, self-examination and willingness to admit wrongs and make self-changes for the gentler from each of us, especially our leaders. Only by those for whom these are most deeply desired and eagerly pursued can the gift of life ever truly be paid. Only by those for whom these are most deeply desired and eagerly pursued can we ever be led and governed well.

Hymn 76 On Jordan's bank the Baptist's cry

On Jordan's bank the Baptist's cry
Announces that the Lord is nigh;
Awake and hearken, for he brings
Glad tidings of the King of kings.

Then cleansed be every breast from sin;
Make straight the way for God within,
And let each heart prepare a home
Where such a mighty guest may come.

To heal the sick stretch out thine hand,
And bid the fallen sinner stand;
Shine forth, and let thy light restore
Earth's own true loveliness once more.

All praise, eternal Son, to thee,
Whose advent doth thy people free;
Whom with the Father we adore
And Holy Spirit evermore.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XHTjCfRFL1I&t=59s>

Sunrise

The east is yellow as a daffodil.
Three steeples—three stark swarthy arms—are thrust
Up from the town. The gnarlèd poplars thrill
Down the long street in some keen salty gust—
Straight from the sea and all the sailing ships—
Turn white, black, white again, with noises sweet
And swift. Back to the night the last star slips.
High up the air is motionless, a sheet
Of light. The east grows yellower apace,
And trembles: then, once more, and suddenly,
The salt wind blows, and in that moment's space
Flame roofs, and poplar-tops, and steeples three;
From out the mist that wraps the river-ways,
The little boats, like torches, start ablaze.

Lizette Woodworth Reese