

The Impossible Paradox  
Isaiah 11:1-10; Matthew 3:1-12

“A green Shoot will sprout from Jesse’s stump, from his roots a budding Branch. The life-giving Spirit of God will hover over him, the Spirit that brings wisdom and understanding, the Spirit that gives direction and builds strength, the Spirit that instills knowledge and Fear-of God.” This is how Eugene Peterson’s *The Message* begins one of Scripture’s best-known - most-loved texts - from Isaiah, chapter eleven, declares the deep and persistent human hope that justice and peace might one day cover the world...words, seen through the perspective of the Christian faith that celebrates the promise of the Christ-child whose coming sets the foundation for that long yearned-for peace.

The Advent season is the time in the church year when we are perhaps most painfully aware that our yearnings for peace continue to be elusive. During Advent we anticipate, once again, the wondrous gift of Jesus, described in John’s Gospel as “the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us . . . full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). But this wondrous gift comes in such an unexpected fashion, and even centuries later, it still seems radically out-of-step with much of human life. Reflecting on today’s text from Isaiah 11, Henri Nouwen reminds us that “our salvation comes from something small, tender, and vulnerable, something hardly noticeable. God, who is the Creator of the universe, comes to us in smallness, weakness, and hiddenness.” A [*mere*] shoot, the prophet asserts, *will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will fruit* (Isaiah 11:1). Yet now, some 2000 years after the hidden and barely noticed birth of Jesus the Christ, we continue to hope and to yearn for the full blossoming of the Branch of peace.

The angels on the night of Jesus’ birth heralded the good news of peace and good will, yet who among us does not mourn humanity’s continuing deep brokenness, with human

life all too frequently marked by suspicion and fear, by violence and warfare, by injustice and greed?

Brian McLaren, in an article titled “The Secret Message of Jesus” reminds us that while “human kingdoms advance by force and violence with falling bombs and flying bullets,” the tender and barely noticeable coming of Jesus into the world signals that God has a very different strategy in mind, a markedly alternative way of visiting and redeeming human life.

Our Gospel lesson from Matthew, chapter three, begins with a rather peculiar Advent character, John the Baptist, shouting, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” It is a cry echoed by Jesus as he later begins his own ministry. John the Baptist’s call to repentance may sound like harsh, even scathing, accusation as he describes some coming to hear him a “brood of vipers” (3:7) and as he speaks of throwing “therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire”. It appears that John the Baptist was trying to knock some sense into the people of his day, that he wanted to shake and compel them to take hold of a new way of living. However, Jesus, while also calling for repentance, is far more prone to speak words of invitation than words of condemnation, words of forgiveness and grace rather than words of grim justice and angry denunciation. Jesus’ words, while inciting his hearers, still invite them to ponder new possibilities, to think about new ways of living, to contemplate what it might mean for them to take hold of the alternative perspective of life in the realm of God.

“Repentance” – One commentary I read defines *repentance* as meaning precisely this: “to rethink - to reconsider your direction and consider a new one, to admit that you might be wrong, to give your life a second thought, to think about your thinking.” The call to repentance, therefore, is not simply a matter of inducing/creating guilt for past behavior; rather, when Jesus talks about repentance, he is speaking the language of transformation

- a change of life perspective and personal character so pronounced that we literally adopt a new way of being in the world, a new way of thinking and relating.

In the realm of God our hearts are softened; compassion rather than competition; generosity in place of greed; gratitude rather than resentment; the welcoming of others instead of suspicion and fear; peace and nonviolence replacing violence and hostility; open hands and hearts instead of anxious resistance - these become the qualities that mark faithful living in our journey as disciples of Jesus.

This radically new vision for life is not something Jesus imposes upon us; rather, Jesus invites us to consider what it might mean for us to embody life in the peaceable kingdom...life in which predators and their prey - the wolf and the lamb, the leopard and the goat, the calf and the lion, the cow and the bear - learn to live in harmony and without fear, all while a little child leads them. The prophet Isaiah envisions a life in which there will no longer be violence and brokenness, but instead “the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea” (Isaiah 11:9). Madeleine L’Engle in an article reflecting on the mystery of the incarnation, writes that “love is not power,” at least not power as we normally understand it. Instead, “love is giving power away. Power in the sense of control...Whenever I love, I give away power. If I try to control or manipulate, then I am not loving. I am using power for my own good, even if I am convinced it’s for someone else’s good.”

Even more so - God’s love is characterized, not by a grasping after position and power and control, but by the giving up of power. God’s love, as made visible in Jesus the Christ, is a self-giving love, a love that frequently surprises us, a love that often confounds and astounds us as we sense its presence in our midst.

However, “today’s church”, writes biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann, “has mostly forgotten just how remarkable and upsetting is the self-giving of Jesus.” Instead, “The

church has gotten into the fear, security, and survival business.” And when that happens, we become far more interested in control and manipulation than in self-giving love.

Brian McLaren suggests that many will see Jesus’ message as scandalous, as Jesus dares to proclaim an alternative to humanity’s long love affair with violence, manipulation, greed, and oppressive control. McLaren questions:

*What if our only hope lies in this impossible paradox: the only way the kingdom of God can be strong in a truly liberating way is through a scandalous, non-coercive kind of weakness; the only way it can be powerful is through astonishing vulnerability; the only way it can live is by dying; the only way it can succeed is by failing?*

An impossible paradox! Yet it is this paradox that stands at the heart of our faith. From the ancient prophet, Isaiah, who anticipated the coming of a new king who would judge with righteousness and rule with compassion, to the One who cried in the wilderness, “Prepare the way of the Lord,” the Scriptures affirm the coming of a markedly new realm/kingdom marked by a love, that on the surface, appears scandalous, vulnerable, and weak, but through those very qualities displays a new strength, a new power, a new hope, a new way to peace.

The monk Thomas Merton captured this same sense when he wrote:

*Instead of loving what you think is peace, love other men [and women] and love God above all. And instead of hating the people you think are war makers, hate the appetites and disorders in your own soul, which are the causes of war. If you love peace, then hate injustice, hate tyranny, hate greed - but hate these in yourself, not in another.*

It’s a risky way of re-creating the world - challenging each of us to live lives of responsibility and lives of integrity. It’s a call to take on new ways of thinking, risky ways of relating, compassionate ways of serving, peaceful ways of interacting. Yet it is the

challenge Jesus offers even now: “The time has come. The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!” (Mark 1:15). Reshape your lives, for God’s new order of the Spirit is confronting you. Human kingdoms may well advance/grow by force and violence, with bombs and bullets, but the new order of God’s Spirit comes quietly and unexpectedly, tenderly and with vulnerability, often unnoticed, easily ignored. No wonder the writer of the carol (*It Came upon a Midnight Clear*, stanza 3) invites warring humankind to “hush the noise and cease your strife, and hear the angels sing”.

God, grant us wisdom, courage, and conviction, as we seek to hush the noise, cease our strife, and listen to the song of the angels. Amen.