

Texts: Isaiah 11:1-10; Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19; Romans 15:4-13; Matthew 3:1-12

I was 10 years old in 1968. (Do the math – that makes me 58.) That year the Vietnam War escalated in the Tet offensive. That year the protests against the war escalated as well. That year Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy were assassinated. That year the winter Olympics were held in Grenoble, France, and the summer Olympics were held in Mexico City. That year Richard Nixon was elected president. That year Apollo 8 orbited the moon on Christmas Eve and broadcast an image of the Earth from space, the first time many people realized how fragile this planet is that we call home.

Has anything changed? There is still war, only this time the fighting is in Syria, and Afghanistan, and the Central African Republic. We live in a world now of suicide bombers and drone strikes, earthquakes in Oklahoma and Hurricane Matthew. We have just come through an election season so polarizing that we wonder how effective government will be possible. We hunker down behind locked doors. We are afraid of people who don't look like we do or dress like we do or worship like we do.

We have been longing for peace on earth for a long time. So when we read in Isaiah of a time to come when there will be no more hostility, when a shoot from the stump of Jesse will rule with righteousness and faithfulness, when the wolf and the lamb and the leopard and the goat and the snake and the toddler will dwell together in harmony – well, it hardly seems possible, right? It seems like utopia, pie in the sky. How can we take it seriously?

There are usually two responses to a reading like this. The first response is to say, "These words were written 700 years before Jesus was born, after Assyria had conquered

and destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel. These words were meant to comfort and encourage the conquered people of Israel. They don't mean anything to us now." The second response is to say, "These words refer to the end times, the day at the end of time when Jesus will return in his glory. We don't have to worry about the brutality and violence of the world we live in because it's all predestined to come to an end."

Hogwash. One of the differences between the Old Testament prophets like Isaiah and the New Testament prophets like John the Baptist, is this: the prophets of the Old Testament tended to speak in the future tense and the writers of the New Testament tended to speak in the present tense. Isaiah spoke of a coming future day when the branch of Jesse – the new ruler from the house of David – would stand as a signal to the nations. John the Baptist cries out that the kingdom of heaven has come near – that the time is now to prepare the way of the Lord.

In this season of Advent there is no time like the present.

John the Baptist himself is the fulfillment of a prophecy spoken by Isaiah. Matthew looks backwards to the old writings and then forward to reinterpret them from the perspective of Jesus Christ. If John the Baptist were to appear today, what do you think he would look like? Tattoos all the way up his arms, maybe? Dreadlocks down to his shoulders, maybe? Dressed like a buckskinner maybe? Skinny from a vegan diet, maybe? No, John the Baptist does not look like us, and his message makes us squirm.

It's a message of repentance. Repentance is a confusing concept. Does it mean feeling sorry for our mistakes? Trying to be a better person? Does it dredge up feelings of guilt and unworthiness? Does it evoke fear of judgment? Yes, sometimes all of these. But this morning, John's message of repentance asks us to turn and look backwards at our lives

and then forward at what is surely coming. Jesus doesn't actually appear in this morning's gospel reading. But John announces that he is on his way. Bringing both judgment and salvation. Bringing a future of hope.

There is no time like the present...

Repentance happens at this present moment, when we look backwards at what has come before, and then we turn and walk forward in a new direction, confident that God will walk with us. Repentance happens at this present moment when we come to understand that God's desire is to transform us into the image of Christ himself.

Repentance happens at this present moment when John the Baptist challenges us to stop looking backward and defining ourselves by who our ancestors were. Repentance happens at this present moment when we stop defining ourselves by the mistakes we made in the past. Repentance happens when we allow God to re-define us, to re-align us. Repentance happens at this present moment when we look backwards to consider all of history and then we turn and look forward to imagine this community, this nation, this planet as God promises it will be. And then we turn to re-align our own lives to work and make it so.

I'm talking specifics here. Last week we read Isaiah's vision of a world where swords have been beaten into plowshares. What would it be like to take our own weapons of mass destruction and our weapons of personal destruction and re-forge them into tools of cultivation and growth? This week we read Isaiah's vision of life where all living beings are equal and live in peace. What would it be like to take our own assumptions about winners and losers, the strong preying on the weak, and re-order them as Jesus did; Jesus, who kept his attention on those who were sick, those who lived on the margins and those who were broken.

We read Psalm 72, God's will for the powerful king, the leader, to use that power to defend the cause of the poor and give deliverance to the needy. What would it be like if our president-elect and all his advisors read this psalm every morning as they began the work of leadership?

We read these scripture passages on this second Sunday of Advent, with our hearts longing for peace and wholeness, healing and justice for all of God's children. We read these passages as we look forward to the fulfillment of God's promises, to a time when all will be made right. We read these passages as followers of Jesus, who chose to come into this world not in the guise of power but in the guise of weakness; Jesus, who extended mercy toward the most vulnerable and healing toward the most damaged. Jesus, who was ultimately crucified precisely for embodying and practicing Isaiah's vision of hope.

Just before the end of World War II, a Jesuit priest named Alfred Delp was executed by the Nazis on false charges connected with the plot to kill Hitler. Here is what Father Alfred wrote from his prison cell:

"Advent is the time of promise. It is not yet the time of fulfillment. We are still in the midst of everything...Space is still filled with the noise of destruction and annihilation, the shouts of self-assurance and arrogance, the weeping of despair and helplessness. But round about the horizon the eternal realities stand silent in their age-old longing. There shines on them already the first mild light of the radiant fulfillment to come. From afar sound the first notes as of pipes and voices, not yet discernable as a song or melody. It is all far off still, and only just announced and foretold. But it is happening, today."

This is what hope looks like: it emerges as a tiny green shoot from a stump that everyone thought was dead. It grows into new life. It gives us the power to overturn old

assumption, to see with new eyes and to heal our warring hearts. There is no time like the present.