

“The One of Whom the Prophet Isaiah Spoke”

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

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Long ago, about eight centuries before Jesus, the prophet Isaiah declared: “A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.” Isaiah was talking about Jesus, of course; the budding blossom that sprung from the line of King David, who was known to be the most deeply spiritual, the most pious, and the most successful of the Israelite kings. David’s father was a man named Jesse, and the kingdom that David had built would come to a bitter end. Hence it was referred to as “the stump of Jesse” – like a tree that would be chopped down. But new growth is coming, a “shoot,” a “branch,” stemming from David’s roots. That “shoot,” that “branch,” is Jesus.

Isaiah declared: “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.” That spirit, the Holy Spirit of God, would descend upon Jesus at his baptism in the Jordan river. “His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord” – that is, he would find his greatest joy and sense of fulfillment in following the will of God. “He shall not judge by what his eyes see or decide by what his ears hear, but with righteousness he shall judge for the poor and decide with equity for the oppressed of the earth.” Jesus’s ministry was marked by righteousness, with special attention to the poor and the oppressed. Although he had some wealthy benefactors and followers, most of the people he ministered to were common folk: not very well off, not very well educated. True Christianity has always placed an emphasis on bringing justice to the oppressed and help to the poor; any version of Christianity that doesn’t do that really can’t be regarded as an authentic ministry of Jesus Christ.

Isaiah continues: “he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.” Here Isaiah is talking about the coming and final judgment of Christ, and the ultimate eradication of all the evil in the world. “Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist and faithfulness the belt around his loins.” Jesus’s dealings with people are all grounded in righteousness, and his relationship with God is marked with fidelity. The results of Christ’s advent will look like this: “The wolf shall live with the lamb; the leopard shall lie down with the kid; the calf and the lion will feed 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.” Isaiah is describing a future restoration of all creation to the glory and peace that God had originally designed for us. A second Eden. Obviously we’re not there yet; that peace will only come when Christ will one day reign on earth as he already reigns in heaven.

Isaiah anticipated that Jesus would be the hope of the whole world, not just the Jews. “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.” Note the words “peoples” and “nations.” We’re not talking just about *one* people, *one* country; we are talking about *many* peoples and *many* countries. The apostle Paul quotes this verse, along with several other similar verses, in Romans 15. The wording changes slightly when translating from Greek instead of from Hebrew; Paul’s version of that verse says, “The root of Jesse shall come, the one who rises to rule the gentiles; in him the gentiles shall hope.” The word “gentile” refers to a person of a non-Jewish nation or of non-Jewish faith – basically, anyone who is not a Jew. Isaiah was anticipating that someone descended from David – who was very much a Jew – would become a beacon to all the nations of the world, and bring salvation to *all* the ends of the earth.

That is just one of a number of prophecies Isaiah made about Jesus. Here in Advent we’re going to hear several of them, all looking forward with expectation to a joyful future filled with hope.

But Isaiah did not just anticipate the coming of Jesus. He also anticipated the one who would come *before* Jesus. He anticipated John the Baptist. In the 40th chapter of Isaiah we read: “A voice cries out: ‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.’” That voice was the voice of John, as Matthew reminds us: “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.’”” There is a straight line running from Isaiah to Jesus, and another straight line running from Isaiah to John. Isaiah was prescient!

Now, to be clear. The ministry of John the Baptist began slightly before the ministry of Jesus. They were contemporaries of each other; in Luke’s gospel we learn that they were relatives of each other, cousins of some sort, born only six months apart. Both men gathered *huge* crowds around them, when they were in their early 30’s. Both of them offered people something special, something of *God*. And both of them ended up dead, as a direct result of their ministry. Jesus, nailed to a cross; John; beheaded. What these men did, what they said, *helped* many, many people. But what they did and what they said also threatened the religious and political establishment. They made enemies. They both gave their lives – quite literally – in service to God.

John is one of about a dozen people who show up not only in the New Testament but also in the writings of the non-Christian historians of the day. His ministry was *that* significant. Josephus, the Jewish historian who wrote near the end of the first century, described John as a “good man” who “commanded the Jews to exercise virtue, both as to righteousness towards one another, and piety towards God.” John invited people to “come to baptism,” both for the remission of sins and for the purification of the body. Many people “came in crowds about him,” and were “very greatly moved by hearing his words.” Josephus says that John’s enormous popularity provoked Herod Antipas, the Roman governor of Galilee, who feared that John’s “great influence over the people” might lead to a rebellion, “for they seemed ready to do anything he should advise.” So Herod captured John and imprisoned him in a fortress called Machaerus, which was in the desert on the far side of the Dead Sea. You can visit its ruins to this day. All of that is remarkably consistent with what the Gospels have to say about John. There is absolutely no question that there was a man named John, who gathered large crowds about him, who called people to greater levels of devotion to God, who washed people with water to cleanse them both physically and symbolically, who was imprisoned and ultimately executed. This isn’t a fable, or a legend; it’s not a scam or a hoax; John *really existed*, peaching and baptizing near the Jordan River, shortly before and during the first part of the ministry of Jesus.

So what was his message? What, specifically, was he telling people to do? Matthew and Luke

give us some clear indications. His fundamental message was one of repentance: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” Merriam-Webster says that to *repent* means “to turn from sin and dedicate oneself to the amendment of one’s life,” or “to feel regret or contrition; to change one’s mind.” The Greek word for repentance is *metanoia*, which literally means “to change one’s *thinking*.” It means you have come to see something in a new and different light, especially with regard to your past beliefs and actions, with the result that you feel regret or remorse about the things you have said or done, and you now have an earnest desire to set things right, not only in terms of how you *think* about certain things, but also in terms of how you interact with other people. If there were things you did in your former way of thinking that you regret, then you try and set them right. If you robbed people, you want to make amends for that somehow. If you hurt people, you want to apologize to them and ask for their forgiveness. It’s a *feeling* that is grounded in your *new beliefs* and *ways of understanding and thinking*, and that *feeling* propels you to earnestly *do things differently* in the future.

Let me tell you ... I think *real* repentance is pretty rare. I have not seen many examples of it over the course of the twenty years that I’ve been doing this job. It is a rare thing when I actively see somebody feeling that kind of remorse and that much desire to live their life differently. I recall a time, a number of years ago, when someone approached me and basically said, “I’ve slept with somebody who’s not my spouse; I’ve royally screwed up my marriage; I feel awful about what I’ve done; and I desperately want to fix it.” That’s repentance. Gold stars for that person, and the hard the hard and difficult work they did to rebuild their marriage. I can think of somebody who successfully dealt with a drug addiction. I can think of somebody who had a major conversion and repentance experience before I knew them. I can think of several people I’ve known in other contexts, including a pastor, who were going down the wrong track and really changed. But it seems to me that a lot of people stay stuck in their sins. A lot of people like to justify their actions – even when they are clearly in the wrong, and hurting other people. I know a number of people who are very good at admitting when they have done something wrong and apologizing for it. But I also know some people who don’t seem to know how to apologize *at all*. They’re prideful. Perhaps they think that apologizing is a sign of weakness. That’s certainly not the message John would have proclaimed. Or Jesus, later on.

I think real repentance is rare. I think not enough people are seriously examining their lives and the way they interact with other people. I think far too many Christians just go through the motions, and never really get around to dealing with the log that’s in their own eye, that is so painfully obvious to other people. Too many Christians, it seems, come to church, sing the songs, pray the prayers, listen to the scriptures, and go right on living pretty much exactly the same way.

That’s not what John the Baptist was out in the wilderness for. That’s not the message he was offering. That’s not what was going on in people’s hearts when they came to him for baptism.

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” “Prepare the way of the Lord.”

John is often called *the Forerunner*. The one who came before Jesus, just slightly before Jesus, to prepare people’s hearts for the coming of the Messiah. As we ourselves await the coming celebration of the Messiah’s birth, let us not miss this important step in the journey. You want to celebrate Christmas? You want to celebrate the coming of Jesus into the world? Well, maybe before we celebrate that birth, it might be worth taking some time to do some self-examination. Some reflection on your life. How are *you*, right now, living the life that God is calling you to live? How are you *not*? Where do you fall short? What about your life does God *most urgently* want you to change?

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