

Presumption and Preparation

Isaiah 11: 1-5

Matthew 3: 1-12

When we take things for granted, we rest confident in our knowledge that things are going to happen a certain way, the way we understand them to occur, and we act accordingly. It becomes rather mind-blowing to discover that our presumed knowledge is bogus. But for many people, they would rather dig in on their wrong ideas rather than admit that their presumptions were inaccurate and needed to be revised.

I substituted for a teacher on Friday who left an assignment for the students to read a 12 page chapter of technical information, noting all of the key words and concepts on a piece of paper, and writing their definitions. Having checked the reading, I noticed that on the second page of the reading was a list of some key words and definitions that would occur in the chapter. Knowing that this presented a really easy way around actually doing the reading itself, I explicitly told the students **not** to turn to that page and copy the words and definitions. I told them to read through the chapter, noting key words and writing down the definitions as they went along.

Sure enough, in less than 20 minutes, a student presented me with a paper listing only words on that second page – an exact copy – and insisted that he had finished the assignment. I explained that he had done precisely what I told him not to do, and re-explained what needed to be done. He repeatedly refused to take the paper back and do it the correct way. I told him to sit there and do nothing for the remaining hour and fifteen minutes of the class.

(My approach in baiting students to do the work is to promise free time once they turn in the completed assignment – and free time includes using their cell phone – but absolutely no cell phone use during class until the assignment gets turned in and it's to my satisfaction. While no cell phone use during class time is the standard rule in every school, they get incentivized to comply on the one hand, and gain permission for an exception to the rule on the other; it works quite well.)

Despite the whole class having heard my exchange with this student, five minutes later three more students present the exact same copied version of the second page. They, too, thought it would be a good thing to argue with me. They insisted that I didn't know what I was talking about, that I didn't really know what the teacher wanted. I asked them if they thought their teacher would have given them a 15 minute task to complete during a 90 minute class period. Seriously? We want back and forth a bit longer and their belligerence only grew. Finally I said that the discussion was over and any further arguing would result in their getting tossed from class. And, no, no cell phone use; just sit there and be quiet for another hour.

They had the option of picking up their paper and doing it right and getting back on track, but this class was not one of your higher performing groups, I had had some of these kids in previous classes and knew their level of self-motivation was barely measurable.

Their presumption about what was needed overrode the true case of what was needed. The next period class was a bit more motivated and did the assignment as it was presented. The teacher even showed up at the end of the last class of the day and confirmed that I had correctly assigned the classwork. He'll have some choice words for that belligerent class.

With a little awareness, we run into this antagonism toward the correction of our wrong-headed presumptions. The failure to correct those presumptions means that we fail to prepare for, and then act on, what might be the wiser, more informed, and more likely successful course of action.

In our Advent season of waiting and anticipation, our scriptures describe what's coming, expressions revealing the word and will of God for his people. The prophecy of First Isaiah speaks memorably about what God will do as the remnant of God's people is gathered in, given sanctuary and new life. Isaiah describes the seemingly lifeless stump of God's vanquished, oppressed and grieving people. From that unlikely stump will come a new shoot, an improbable, even impossible shoot of new life and hope that only God could create and grow.

This shoot will come from Jesse's lineage, father of King David. It's a royal line, but one so corrupted over the years that it seemed lost, a relic of dreamy by-gone eras. But God would raise a branch of new life from that decayed hulk and that Branch would bear fruit. God's people are, in effect, told to beware of relying so much on their presumptions that God cannot create dramatic new life out of a lifeless stump.

Of course, the stump, the Branch, and the fruit are all metaphors about the One whom God will reveal. God's Spirit will be with him, giving him all good gifts of wisdom, intellect and spirit. It does **not** say that God will give him great strength, armies or warriors, or wealth or power, or even prestige. It's as if such things don't matter in the work of God, that only the gifts of the Spirit of God really matter.

What will this Chosen One of God do with his gifts? Lacking what **we** presume this Chosen One needs, what could this "royal" accomplish without wealth, power, or even a crown?

He will do the work of God, not judging by appearances or deciding by the choice words of others. This One will simply seek the righteousness and justice of God. This One will not be guided the presumptions that have found it convenient to abandon righteousness for self-interest, and compromise justice for expediency. He won't deny these key pillars of God's Kingdom from the little people, the poor and needy, the weak and marginal, the people of God's care and compassion. But neither will this One be meek before the wicked, tolerating their corruption and conniving. They'll be blown away. This One will wear his righteousness as a belt and his faithfulness as a sash so that all will know him and his way.

Then we have those images of the animals just as we heard a few weeks ago in Isaiah 65, the contrary images of wolf with lamb, leopard with goat, calf with lion, all living together in harmony and peace. What is this? Has the lion lost its claws and teeth, or has the wolf lost its snarl and its pack instinct? No, that's not what's described. The animals are the same, but the spirit is changed, caused by the Chosen One of God. The appetite for murderous domination and exploitation, and the spirit for oppressive fear and intimidation are gone. Indeed, the weak no longer flee the mere sight of the predator, and the predator no longer sees the weak as easy prey to be devoured as the next meal. Because of the Chosen One of God, they share a new spirit that's a blessing for each one of God's creatures. Spirits are incredibly transformed, newly shaped into the creation that God had always intended and desired.

That's quite a prophecy, starting with a dead old stump and achieving the transformation of every spirit. Read the prophets with eyes open to the vision they're describing and you'll see the incredible power of faith in God come alive.

From the pages of Matthew, we hear the description of another prophet, one who is not in the city, not in the temple, not in the marketplace. This prophet of God is in the Desert of Judea, a desolate place by the Dead Sea, and the prophet is in the north by the Jordan River. He is not only a prophet, but indeed the prophet prophesied *by* the ancient prophets. He is the forerunner, the image of Elijah who returns to prepare the way for the Chosen One of God, "the voice of one calling...."

His physical description and lifestyle reveal a man on the edge, and that's always the prophet of God – a little bit crazed, "out there" in the mystery of God's calling. This prophet is John, and people are coming out from Jerusalem and from around the region in such numbers that he's drawn the attention of the powerful.

Folks have come to confess their sins and to be bathed in the river waters, made ritually clean, ready for the day of the coming of the Chosen One of God. We have no descriptions of who these people are, except they're coming from all over. They're preparing, fully expecting God's promise to be fulfilled.

But then John sees some folks who aren't so eager to come and repent of their sins. They aren't sharing in the spirit of this special time and place. These are clearly Pharisees and Sadducees who have been noticeably standing off from the crowds, likely chatting among themselves. John figures them out. They aren't coming to him for sacred purposes. Oh, they've come to watch, **and** also to judge. This prophet attracting crowds of people out in the desert has gotten the attention of the powerful elite. These righteous ones have not come with sins to confess, for they presume their own righteousness and consider this spectacle in different terms. They hope to return to Jerusalem and to their superiors with misdeeds to report. They want to accuse John, but he's onto them.

'Sons of snakes! **As if you** could know what's coming!' John shouts at them. 'Show the fruit of humility, you self-righteousness vipers! Don't be so presumptuous to believe that your heritage has you covered. Your righteousness will suffer the axe, and

the tree of your justification will be rendered a lifeless stump, for the wrath of mighty God will come upon you.'

See, the image of the stump comes again, and the nature of the fruit we're called to bear. As God brings life out of the stump in Isaiah, *here* we're reminded that the stump of the once great tree – now fallen – was beset by the ax-hand of God. I'd imagine at such words, the boys from Jerusalem are beginning to backtrack. They're thinking, 'This madman obviously has no concern for his own well-being. His words are ominous and threatening. He's a danger and must be stopped.'

But John isn't finished. He reminds this skittish pack of wolves that there is One coming after him, One far greater and more powerful. His baptism will be in the Holy Spirit. His baptism in the Spirit will truly change the order of things. Those who have wasted the promise, and instead presumed the sanctity and security of their own agenda, they will find themselves consumed by the judgment of God. But those who brought home the harvest, having prepared for the coming, bearing fruit in the promise, they will be gathered in, a pleasing offering for God.

From these images, we're alerted that the coming of God's Chosen One is transforming. We learn that the Spirit is the tool for truly great works to be generated and achieved. There are no vast empires, no huge storehouses of wealth, nor any grand displays of military might. Rather, it's the new spirit reshaping the contours of creation, inside and out. The wicked are finished off. Once gone, the creation finds new justice, new peace, and new life: the wolf lying together with the lamb.

Cast aside your presumptions, and prepare with the Baptist for the coming of the Lord. Let your spirit be prepared inwardly as you prepare yourself outwardly. The Lord comes to fulfil God's ancient promise. He comes with spiritual power that is all about justice, peace, and new life in the Kingdom of God that overthrows the injustice of the powers-that-be and ends their exploitation of God's people.

He comes to erase our presumptions and transform our spirits. Yes, he comes to make us ready for a shoot of new life that he will raise up from the stump of what we may have presumed; indeed, the stump of what we may have become.