

The Kingdom Has Come Near

Isaiah 11: 1-5

Matthew 3: 1-12

The last thing a procrastinator like me wants to hear is that “the time has come.” That means that I’m actually going to have to do something. If I submit something days before the deadline, or arrive 10 minutes early to an appointment, I don’t pat myself on the back. Instead, I wonder what I did wrong in failing to procrastinate long enough. I certainly wasted some time somewhere.

That’s an example of time as we measure it. Not simply days and weeks and months as those of biblical times, we measure time in hours and minutes, even down to infinitesimal micro-fractions of seconds.

In the scriptures, we’re typically talking about a less precise, more intuitive understanding of time. For example, it’s time for son Ray to produce a ring, Sara’s father said rather bluntly. The exact time is quite indistinct, but there is an intuitive sense that the time has come. Or when a reasonably mature individual behaves like someone much less mature, we might say that it’s time for him (or her) to grow up already. The time or season for an occurrence has passed; we don’t know when that time was exactly, but we know that it has come and gone.

That’s the kind of sense you get with God’s time, something which is given a different word in Greek from conventional time. God’s time or God’s season isn’t going to be discerned by a sundial *or* a smartwatch. That was the work of the prophets. Part of the prophet’s role was to announce the signs of the next season of God’s actions. The prophet would interpret God’s will, but also in the course of that interpretation, to discern and disclose the season of God’s activity. Not only do the prophets of the Old Testament’s Hebrew scriptures do this, we also find John the Baptist and Jesus acting in the prophetic role.

In Advent, we are waiting and waiting involves time. But it is that indistinct, intuitive time. Like in a movie when something is going to happen, you just know it’s going to happen – no doubt about it – but *when* is the question. Then you ask a stupid question that ruins the whole story. Like, why would that person walk down a dark alley all alone; what a moron! They simply are and they are going to get murdered.

In Advent, we already know that God is going to act, but when. Of course, being smarty-pants, we think we know it all. Don’t be like that!

Both Jesus and the writers of the New Testament found lots of material in their scriptures referring to a time when God would act decisively and do something quite amazing. Isaiah texts are common during Advent since Isaiah sees God’s blessing coming to God’s people throughout the three separate works in time that are produced by an “Isaiah school” of writers.

The prophecy of First Isaiah, written around 700 BCE when the Assyrians had taken the northern Kingdom of Israel and were also exacting tribute while menacing the southern Kingdom of Judah. 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 usual expectations and believe that God can 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 this work of God; 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.

If we continue reading, then we have those 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 from the animal world just as from the human world. 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, just as in the human world metaphorically. Because of the Chosen One of God, they share a new spirit that's a blessing for each one of God's creatures. All 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 which they describe and you'll see the incredible power of faith in God come alive.

From the pages of Matthew, we hear of another prophet in the Desert of Judea, a desolate place by the Dead Sea, 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 of the Kingdom, the image of Elijah who returns to prepare the way for the Chosen One of God, "the voice of one calling in the wilderness."

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, readied for the day of the coming of the Chosen One of God. We don't know if they're being made ritually clean, or if they are being initiated into the Kingdom life, or some combination of both. These people are preparing, fully expecting God's promise of an imminent new age or new time or new era 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, perhaps 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 and in purifying fire. 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 purifying fire of God. Since there is no fruit being borne, the purifying fire will utterly consume them. 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. We learn that the fire will burn away the chaff and refuse while the harvest will bring rejoicing for those who bore the fruit of the promise of God.

Here there are no vast empires, no huge storehouses of wealth, nor any grand displays of military might or royal pageantry. Rather, it's the new spirit reshaping the contours of creation, inside and out. The wicked who cling to injustice and oppression, who remain indifferent to the poor and struggling, who leave the sick to die, their reign over God's creation is finished. Once gone, the creation finds new justice, new peace, and new life: the wolf lying together with the lamb.

The Baptist calls for the faithful to begin living a new life that is oriented to the coming Kingdom. The time is near; the time is at hand. Repent and change, turning to the new life ways that honor God and God's will for justice, peace, and new life. Align yourselves no longer with the powers of the world who distort and corrupt, who make the unacceptable acceptable, who justify greed and self-serving ways while God's people suffer and die. Rather turn to the healing goodness, grace and blessing of God instead.

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. Yes, he comes bringing a shoot of new life that he will raise up from the stump of what we may have become. May we be ready, primed to bear the fruit of the everlasting promise of God.