

Isaiah 11:1-10 and Matthew 3:1-12 *Preparing for the Unexpected*

First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, Alabama

December 8, 2019

The Rev. Terry Hamilton-Poore

1 A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. 2 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. 3 His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; 4 but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. 5 Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins. 6 The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. 7 The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. 8 The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. 9 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. 10 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.

Matthew 3:1-12

1 In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, 2 "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." 3 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.'" 4 Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. 5 Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, 6 and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. 7 But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? 8 Bear fruit worthy of repentance. 9 Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. 10 Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 11 I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 12

His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

Last Sunday in *The Birmingham News* there was a really interesting article on mulching. I know it doesn't seem possible to have a "really interesting" article on mulching, but bear with me!

Bill Finch, who writes the gardening column, was cautioning local gardeners against mulching plants as a way of protecting them against winter weather. While that can be a helpful move in areas of the country with hard winters, he tells us that here in Alabama, it can actually hurt the plants. "Yes," he says, "mulches can keep the ground from losing heat. But they also prevent the ground from gaining heat during the South's frequent winter warm spells."¹

So in thinking we're protecting our plants, we may actually be preventing them from receiving what they need to survive until spring: sunshine. Warmth.

It matters, then, what we're expecting. If we're expecting months of hard freezes, then, by all means: mulch! But if we're expecting the occasional cold snap offset by milder weather, then we need to rake back that layer and leave the soil open in order for sun and warmth to get in.

¹ Bill Finch, "Wait, is mulching in winter good or bad? Yes, no, not so fast," *The Birmingham News* (Sunday, December 1, 2019) C 5.

So, this Advent, what are we expecting, and how are we preparing ourselves for it?

Mostly, I think I expect disaster. I've lived in several different regions of the country, and each of them specializes in different kinds of disasters for which the residents need to prepare. In the Midwest, it was tornadoes and hail, flooding and blizzards. In the Southeast, ice storms and hurricanes. California had earthquakes, mudslides, and fire; and now to Alabama, where we're told to expect ice storms, tornadoes, and the occasional, freak blizzard. I ask you: how does anyone, anywhere, survive?!

Of course, I'm kidding, but I'm also kind of not. Especially as climate change takes hold, the danger of every kind of natural disaster has intensified. And even if we managed to reverse our carbon output right now, the effects of what we've already done to the environment will continue to increase before they ever, eventually, begin to ease. We need to expect disasters and prepare for them.

Politically, too, our world is so off-kilter that human-made disasters seem inevitable. When having tens of thousands of children being held in detention camps no longer shocks us, and mass shootings are just an after-thought on the news, we can be assured that the cultural disaster is already upon us. We would be wise to prepare for more to come.

The problem is, though, that by expecting disaster we end up *accepting* disaster and easing it on its way. We give up on changing our lifestyles, because the world is going to heat up, anyway. We stop holding public servants accountable for their actions, because all politicians are corrupt, right? We indulge in hurtful behaviors online and even in person, because everybody does it and, after all, free speech is our right.

Because we expect disaster and accept destruction, we tamp down our hopes, cover up our hurt and fear, and hunker down for the long, hard winter.

What happens, though, if something *else* is on its way? Something good?

Something world changing? If we are prepared only for disaster, huddled under our protective covering, then we may miss that in-breaking, completely.

That's what happened to the Pharisees and Sadducees who went out to the Jordan to be baptized by John. Matthew tells us that all the people of Jerusalem and Judea and the whole region were coming out to confess their sins and be baptized, and John had been baptizing them right and left without a word of chastisement until the Pharisees and Sadducees showed up. He looked at them and knew, right away, that they were there for the wrong reason. "Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?!" he demanded. That hadn't been his message, at all.

They misread the forecast. They were expecting disaster and trying to protect themselves. Yes, what was coming *was* disruptive, and it would involve judgement, but it would be judgement designed to lead toward new life. The others being baptized knew this. Their baptisms were acts of repentance. Like clearing away excess mulch from around a plant, their confessions revealed the truth about their lives so that God’s new life could reach them and they could be changed. The Pharisees and Sadducees, on the other hand, were seeking baptism as coverage *against* change—a way to keep themselves safe and secure in the status quo. In thinking this, they were creating their own disaster. “Even now,” John thundered at them, “the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” And as we know from our lesson on mulching, a tree whose roots can’t receive the good news will be unable to bear good fruit.

So, what are we expecting, and how are we preparing for it?

The theologian Jurgen Moltmann points out that “There are two words in Latin for the future: *Futurus* and *Adventus*. *Futurus* is predicting the future by seeing the present. *Adventus* is the future invading the present. We don’t look at the present into the future, but from the future into the present.”²

² Jurgen Moltmann, found at <https://www.bible.com/events/142516>, accessed December 5, 2019.

In other words, *Futurus* is the understanding that the future is the logical outcome of what is happening in the present. That's where disaster-preparedness comes in.

Adventus, or Advent, on the other hand, is the understanding that the future includes something else, entirely—divine action that's coming to break in upon human action, confronting the present and disrupting the inevitable destruction that we are bringing upon ourselves. Those of us who are Christians must also be prepared for that completely illogical, unexpected in-breaking of grace.

But how? How do we prepare for both?

John the Baptist points us back to Isaiah, in which the hulking trees of empire and oppression are clear-cut to make way for the gracious realm we heard described today. In that peaceful realm, which Matthew calls the kingdom of heaven, there is no terror or domination, but true peace in which the vulnerable are protected and the powerful are trustworthy. There, all creatures can thrive because, God says through Isaiah, "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."

Given today's reality, that would, indeed, be an unexpected future; but this is Advent, and, as Moltmann reminds us, Advent teaches that we must look backward from the expected future to the present, not the other way around.

So, how do we live responsibly in this world that is hurtling toward almost-certain disaster, while also preparing ourselves for the unexpected promise of God's gracious realm? We connect the dots backward.

If what we are expecting is a realm of peace, we live as peaceful people.

If what we are expecting is a world in which justice does not favor the wealthy and the powerful, then we work to eliminate our own unconscious biases, and treat all people as equals.

If what we are expecting is a reality in which the vulnerable will be protected and no one will hurt or destroy, then we protect the vulnerable now, and treat this present creation with care.

If what we are expecting is a culture in which all can thrive, then we let go of selfishness and suspicion and live with trust and generosity toward our fellow-creatures now, today, in this reality.

Do we honestly expect these things? Maybe not. It's hard to, when we look around us. But a first step is preparing for them, anyway. We do so not just for the sake of that future, but for our own sake; because if we stay hunkered down and covered up in protective mode, we will deprive ourselves of the grace that breaks through even now, in this harshest of worlds.

So we shouldn't prepare ourselves for disaster and wrath to come. We should prepare ourselves for healing and grace to come, illogical and unexpected though that is.

And in preparing for the unexpected, we help to remove the obstacles and clear the path until what now seems impossible becomes not just expected, but inevitable: the gracious, peaceful reign of our loving Lord. Thanks be to God.