

Being Led  
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**Isaiah 11:1-10**

<sup>1</sup> A shoot shall come out from the stock of Jesse,  
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.

<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> 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;

<sup>4</sup> 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.

<sup>5</sup> Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,  
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.

<sup>6</sup> 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.

<sup>7</sup> The cow and the bear shall graze,  
their young shall lie down together;  
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.

<sup>8</sup> The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,  
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.

<sup>9</sup> 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.

<sup>10</sup> 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

<sup>1</sup> In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, <sup>2</sup>‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.’ <sup>3</sup>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.”’

<sup>4</sup>Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. <sup>5</sup>Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, <sup>6</sup>and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

<sup>7</sup> 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? <sup>8</sup>Bear fruit worthy of repentance. <sup>9</sup>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. <sup>10</sup>Even now the axe 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.

<sup>11</sup> ‘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. <sup>12</sup>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.’

I’m about to admit some things that would horrify many of my colleagues - I love Christmas music. I like singing Christmas carols - gasp - before Christmas. I put my tree up early and am not especially picky about when baby Jesus is added to my home nativity scenes. I watch Hallmark “Christmas” movies which, when they have any theology to them, usually have extremely watered-down theology. To those of my colleagues who rightfully revere Advent and respect the season of preparation, whose personal practices in this season are guided by the measured unfolding of the story of the incarnation of our God, my embrace of all things secular, my willy-nilly, all-in right-away approach to Christ’s birth misses the faithful waiting and anticipation we are called to as those who understand the weighty significance of God-with-us, Immanuel. The church of my upbringing, if they tried to make me aware, didn’t succeed in helping me delineate the difference between the season of Advent and the season of Christmas. Any lessons around this didn’t stick. So I welcome

the switch of soft rock/pop stations to all-Christmas-music-all-the-time. I love the feeling of culture's Christmas. And I don't really know how to undo that. Nor do I know that I want to undo it.

I think, instead, I'd rather live in the tension. Christmas as the culture around us defines it alongside Christmas as our faith defines it. Of course, many would say that Christmas as culture defines it has absolutely nothing to do with the Advent and Christmas of our faith. I wonder about that, though. Isaiah talks about a new shoot growing from existing stock. Oddly, secular Christmas grew out of the original Advent season of the church. And I think, for me who was immersed in the secular above the sacred, the sacred is the new shoot growing, or re-growing if you will. The old stock is there, I mean the really old, original stock, there underneath the many grafts of cultural Christmases - here an evergreen tree is added, there the cattle which are lowing, and here St. Nick and your shoes - but what is sprouting has come from much deeper. This is the sturdy stem, the one which cannot be diseased or killed.

Isaiah is believed to have been speaking about the new leader Israel needed after having been overtaken and decimated by Assyria. They needed leadership to bring them back to God, back to right relationship. This is the leader I seek, one who will guide me in right ways, the one whose example is judging not by what his eyes see, deciding not by what his ears hear, but judging with righteousness and deciding with equity. He will lead me to the time when dissension will become harmony and peace will prevail. He will lead me to actions and words which will be a help and not a hindrance in bringing about this peace. We in the church speak of the already-not-yet, the strange state in which we know that the kingdom has already been brought to earth but we know, too, that the kingdom is not yet complete. Our transformations are in the same already-not-yet state. And I don't simply mean moving from a secular holiday to a sacred holy day.

We read John the Baptist's diatribe in Matthew this morning and he warns those gathered and listening that "one who is more powerful...will gather his wheat into the granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." I've always heard this, read this, believed this to mean some made the cut and some did not. Not so, my friends. What I've

learned is that the edible wheat grain grows with a protective, inedible shell around it. We might call this the bran or the hull; in Jesus' time through medieval times it was called the chaff. And this makes for an entirely different reading. Jesus takes each of us, growing in the sun, protected by our shells of cultural-adherence or a mindset of judge-**lest**-thee-be judged (not judge-not) or shells of unhealthy coping mechanisms or the distance we keep from others lest we be hurt, and he strips away that shell. When we have been fully transformed, all that is left is the heart of ourselves, raw, accessible, vulnerable, without any protection - because protections are what keep us from being in relationship with one another and with God. When Jesus has transformed us, the protections we had are destroyed fully and for good, burned away as if by an unquenchable fire.

In some small measure, I trust this means I'll have fully let go of my "Last Christmas"-singing, tree-trimming, gift-buying ways in favor of an Advent of preparing the way of the Lord. I'll yearn for the feeling of the church's Advent and Christmas over the culture's Christmas. In larger measure, those other protections will fall away. For me to aid this along, though, I need to walk toward the winnowing fork, that instrument that tosses the wheat grains in the air for the chaff to be blown away before the heavier heart of the grain falls to the ground. Which means heeding the words of wisdom from the lesser known prophets of Blue Öyster Cult: "don't fear the reaper."<sup>1</sup> Facing the reaper means giving up the last shred of control I imagined I had. Letting myself be stripped of protections, letting my chaff be burned away, lets go of that imagined control, which I value so much. And I'm admittedly afraid.

But here's the thing - that baby Jesus who makes his way to my manger tells me it will be okay. God-with-us-unable-to-feed-or-shelter-himself is the one more powerful to come and yet gave up control, lived without the protections from the beginning through to the end. And it **was** scary at times. But not impossible. Completely worthwhile. Peace-bringing, righteous, equitable. We prepare a path for Jesus to come not only to this earth but to each of us. We work to clear the obstacles which would keep our chaff wrapped tightly around us.

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<sup>1</sup> (*Don't Fear*) *The Reaper*, Blue Öyster Cult, written by Buck Dharma, Columbia Music, 1976.

We work to unlock the doors and open the windows that we might be made vulnerable, that we might be led out of our security for the greater good of peace and reconciliation with others and with God. So may it be for you and for me this Advent.

Let us pray: With your wisdom and understanding, counsel and might, lead us, we pray.  
Amen.