

December 8, 2019

Grace and peace be to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.
Amen

Our Old Testament text from Isaiah is a well-known one. Isaiah is prophesying about Jesus – the shoot from Jesse. This new ruler, Jesus, will renew David's royal line.

We tend to love the language of Isaiah. First we learn that the one to come, Jesus, will judge with righteousness, with equity and with faithfulness. That is indeed good news to the people then as well as to us today. How we long for a world that is filled with righteousness, equity and faithfulness. We seriously long for that daily.

And we learn from Isaiah what that world would look like: the wolf will live with the lamb, the lion and the calf will be together led by a child, the cow and the bear shall graze together, the nursing child shall play with the deadly asp.

Likely we've all seen artistic renditions of what that particular scene might look like. And we stare at them hoping upon hope that such a world would come to pass today. Right now we as a society, culture and world are mired in what seems to be the exact opposite. Where division is apparent everywhere we look, where the desire for freedom is met with fierce pushback, where nations are actively involved in the political decisions of other countries and on and on it goes. The right vs. the left with no middle ground, no compromise. It's enough to get you down, isn't it?

Isaiah prophesies that the root of Jesse, Jesus, will be a signal to the people. And yet we know that many rejected the signal, Jesus, because he did not come as they thought the Messiah would and they continued to discredit him and eventually they decided that he must be done away with permanently. Yet he was and still remains a signal to all who will look to him and his teachings.

From Isaiah we move to the gospel of Matthew and hear, once again, Matthew tell us of John the Baptist. John must have been a sight to see: clothing of camel's hair, a leather belt around his waist and a diet that consisted of locusts and wild honey. He must have stood out wherever he went.

He certainly stood out as he proclaimed "Repent, for the kingdom of God comes near." He tells all who will listen that he is referring to Isaiah and that his prophecy is about to come true. And just so, everyone needs to "Prepare the way of the Lord, make the paths straight."

John the Baptist in harking back to the great prophet is preparing the people to understand that the idea of God's peace on earth is about to be identified and furthermore, everyone must do one thing and only one thing to be ready when that time comes – and it is coming soon, very soon. What people must do is simple – repent.

And an outward sign of that repentance is to be washed with the water of repentance – with water – to be baptized by John – to be cleansed as a sign of repentance.

John is scary – both in his physical appearance and in his message. He'll get your attention quickly. You see, he knows what's going on with people, with society, with the culture of the day. He knows the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. He knows of the oppressive nature of the culture. He knows that many people only pay lip service to their religion.

And John says it's time to stop and listen and see what's about to take place, and to repent and be ready when that time comes. John's message is easily spoken, but not easily heard by all.

John is saying, in his own way, that the people then and all of us today, must come to understand that we cannot know the ideal as set forth by Isaiah without heart-felt continual repentance.

An important aspect of our Lutheran worship service is the placement of the Confession and Forgiveness of sins that takes place early in our service. That is no accident. It is placed early so that we can continue to worship knowing that we have confessed our sins before God and one another and we have heard God's words of forgiveness. Weekly we hear that we are forgiven followers of Jesus as we joyfully move through our worship service and into the week ahead..

And yet there is one aspect of confession and forgiveness that we must take personal responsibility for: repentance. Yes, we are no different from the folks John the Baptist was speaking to.

Repentance isn't a once-and-done kind of thing. You and I constantly fall short of the glory of God. And therefore we need to always be considering how we stop doing what we know we should not do and walk closer to God, acting and living more and more like his faithful disciples.

And that's hard. Not all people want to do that, just as all the people didn't migrate to John the Baptist and undergo his washing of forgiveness and then set out to repent.

Walking toward God, living as Jesus would have us live with himself as the example, is not always easy. And we know that to be a fact. After all, we are human and we are fallible. We are not perfect. Yet we are loved by God who created us and we are held in his arms always.

Just as John the Baptist knew what was taking place in the world in which he lived, you and I know what is taking place in our world today. And no one I know likes what we see, what we are living through, whether locally or globally.

It seems that reading the newspaper, watching news on television and however it is that we get our news and our view of the world, we find that not much changes on a daily basis, and yet the changes we see are not working to correct all that is seemingly wrong.

We seem to be mired in a divisive reality that has no limits. As divided as our nation is, so is the world. There seem to be divisions everywhere, over every issue of society and culture. It's rampant and depressing. It's frustrating and gaining momentum.

It's not terribly difficult, I believe, to come to the conclusion that as Christians we have something to add to the mix that speaks against it all. In other words, if we are not part of the solution, we are part of the problem.

I think this is an appropriate time to ask that age old question – what would Jesus do? Or more specifically – what would Jesus have us do on his behalf?

As his disciples you and I have an opportunity to live out what it means to be a Christian today for us, given where we live and work and those we interact with regularly.

As we continue to live lives of confession, forgiveness and repentance, as we follow Christ's teachings more closely we, collectively we Christians, need to come up with new ways to communicate that positively impact everyone.

Jesus didn't invent the parable, but he used parables as a way to communicate God's truths to human situations, human predicaments.

How can we work together with like-minded people to begin a new conversation that will have the possibility of correcting the ills we now live through daily? That's the challenge for all of us today.

John the Baptist certainly was aware of Isaiah's prophecy about God's ideal of a peaceful kingdom. He helped prepare the people to be part of the revolution that was about to appear and wreck-havoc on the status quo.

Perhaps the question for us today is this – how can God prepare us to be part of a movement toward the day when wolves and lambs, and leopards and goats and calves and bears and lions and nursing children and asps live in peace and harmony, not fearing each other?

I'll leave that question with each of us as a point of meditation and prayer for the week ahead.

Thanks be to God. Amen

