

# Scripture Readings and Sermon

*December 8, 2019 by Rev. Mark Brechin*

## **Commentary on Isaiah 11:1-10** (*Youtube [Lectionary Study Video](#)*)

Isaiah 7-11 takes place against the back drop of the Syro-Ephraimite War during the reign of King Ahaz of Judah in the 8th century BC. The kingdoms of Aram and Israel (Ephraim) called on Judah to join in their war against the Assyrian Empire. Realizing the fragile position of Judah, Ahaz refused to be caught in the middle of a war. In his fear, however, Ahaz pledges loyalty to Assyria instead of trusting in God. Isaiah then begins a series of prophecies about a new "king" who will unite the two kingdoms of Israel and Judah. For their disobedience, both kingdoms will be punished and cleared out like a field with trees. "Even if a tenth part remain in it, it will be burned again, like a terebinth or an oak whose stump remains standing when it is felled. The holy seed is its stump." (Isaiah 6:13) Even so, a remnant will be left of Israel and Judah and a king shall arise out of the "stump of Jesse". The passage today describes what the new kingdom will be like under this new righteous king. Under his reign, the kingdom of David will be restored and peace shall prevail not just in Judah but will spread to all the nations.

## **Commentary on Romans 15:4-13** (*Youtube [Lectionary Study Video](#)*)

Concluding Paul's teaching to the church at Rome on how the Good News should shape how they live together as a community, Paul urges them to come together in hope and harmony. This harmony should exist between the Jews (the circumcised) who follow the "promises given to the patriarchs" and the Gentiles who glorify God because of God's mercy. This passage is included in Advent because of the reference to Isaiah 11 and sprout from the root of Jesse associated with Jesus' birth. The reference, however, may confuse modern readers because Paul is quoting the Greek Old Testament (the Septuagint) and not the Hebrew Old Testament used in most modern translations. While the Greek uses the words "rule" and "hope", the Hebrew uses the words "banner/ensign" and "rest". So that Romans is translated, "the one who rises to rule the Gentiles; in him the Gentiles shall hope" while Isaiah is translated, "Who shall stand as a banner to the people; For the Gentiles shall seek Him, And His resting place shall be glorious." Despite the translation difference, the context for both passages is the uniting of people in harmony under a new king understood by Christians as being Jesus Christ.

## **Commentary on Matthew 3:1-12** (*Youtube [Lectionary Study Video](#)*)

While it is not uncommon to have shared stories between the "synoptic" gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), it is uncommon for all three gospels to tell the same story. This passage of John the Baptist proclaiming "Prepare the way of the Lord" can be found in Mark (1:1-8), Luke (3:1-18), and John (1:19-28). This reference to Isaiah 40 which is traditionally read on the second Sunday in Advent reminds the church to prepare for Christmas not only with decorations but more important with a close examination of their hearts. John's call for preparation was a call to perform a the 'mikveh' or ritual cleansing not just of the body but of the soul. This cleansing would be complete when the Holy Spirit burned away all the dross from the soul. In the Gospel of Matthew, dross is defined as anything other than the will of God. Ritual obedience and righteousness through tradition was considered by Matthew the worst kind of dross since it gave the illusion of being ready while only being false gold. This call to prepare for the Lord by getting right with God places John firmly in the tradition of the prophets. Even the description John's appearance mirrors Elijah, "A hairy man, with a leather belt around his waist." (2 Kings 1:8) For Christians today, the prophet still needs to be heard for many rely more on their ritual baptism/confirmation and their regular worship attendance than they rely on a living relationship with God through Jesus Christ in by the power of the Holy Spirit. The call to prepare a place means to make

space in our lives for the coming of Jesus.

### **Sermon "Make His Paths Straight" (*Sermon Video*)**

It is tradition that on the second week of Advent, one of the gospel passages which refer to John the Baptist proclaiming "Prepare the way of the Lord" is read. The quote from Isaiah ends with, "make his paths straight" but how are we to make his paths straight. Looking to the readings from Romans and Isaiah for insight, the theme of unity and harmony emerge as a major theme. Sermon preparation, however, was interrupted when my lower back decided to go out again.

Back and muscle pain is not uncommon given that I have one of those mysterious affliction in the nervous system. The problem produces sporadic symptoms much like a short in the wiring system between a truck and a trailer. You know when it happens but, when you go to try and fix it, it is almost impossible to replicate. The "short" causes muscle convulsions which have at times compressed arteries, closed off the esophagus, and produced the same symptoms as IBS. While medication helps minimize most of these occurrences, the most common problem is convulsions in major muscle groups that cause bulging discs and pelvis protrusions which can be most painful. When my skeletal structure is not in alignment, it distorts everything. I need to be straight in order to find relief from pain and perceive the world correctly.

When our souls are out of alignment because of overwhelming trials, bad habits, or simply stresses of the world, our lives can be filled with spiritual and emotional pain. This pain can distort our perception of the world which can produce an even great misalignment. Relationships become broken and divisions seep into every aspect of life. Distorted by pain, these divisions seem to great for any reconciliation. Never before have these divisions been on such a display during "peace time" as in the political and religious arena of our day. Old institutions and systems appear to be at their breaking point. We need help to restore unity and harmony. We need help not only to repair our broken society but to remove the obstacles in our souls and straighten out our lives. We need the shoot from the stump of Jesse.

When Isaiah wrote about the root of Jesse, the northern tribe of Israel and the southern tribe of Judah were on opposite sides of a war which would eventual lead to the collapse of both. The kingdom of David was shattered and yet the Lord promised that one day an anointed one would make whole that which is broken. He will not only judge the earth with righteousness but he will restore the original harmony and unity of the Garden of Eden when there was no predator or prey.

In Romans, Paul declares that we have this anointed one called Messiah in Hebrew and Christ in Greek. In Christ Jesus, the religious divisions of Jew and Gentile are gone. The brokenness and rivalry between clean and unclean is gone. Harmony is found in Christ because in Christ we are made into a new creation through the power of the Holy Spirit. This is what John the Baptist was proclaiming at the Jordan. The Holy Spirit will melt, refine, and reshape the heart according to God's will. No longer will people be bound to just a written law but will know God's will in their hearts through the power of the Holy Spirit. It will no longer be about the supremacy of Scripture but about the supremacy of the living Word. This is why John warns the Pharisees and Sadducees not to rely on their presumed righteousness but rather to humbly bow before God.

When we give our lives to God, God and not humans is the one who makes straight the path. With God's help, we can find relief from our pain and harmony in our world. The only thing we are asked to do is invite Jesus into our lives. Will you make room in your inn for Jesus to be born?