

*Branch of Peace*

December 5, 2010 Advent 2A

Isaiah 11:1-10

Pastor Vern Christopherson

Isaiah was a dreamer, a big dreamer. He lived in 8<sup>th</sup> Century B.C. He was a prophet in southern Israel 750 years before Christ. He'd seen a lot of war in his day. Assyria had invaded the northern part of the country. Cities were flattened, homes burned, lives destroyed. Frankly, Isaiah was sick and tired of the fighting.

When a new king came to power—a promising king in the line of David, son of Jesse—Isaiah began to dream of peace. It was a dream almost too good to be true. He dreamed that this king, with the help of God's spirit, would restore God's intention from the Garden of Eden: timberwolves and lambs in the same pasture, mountain lions in the barn with the milk cows, toddlers playing in the park with poisonous snakes. Everyone would be safe. They would not hurt or destroy on all God's holy mountain.

But time for a reality check. No lasting peace came in Isaiah's lifetime. Oh, some kings were better than others, some worked harder for justice than others, but none of them brought a return to paradise. If truth be told, dreamers like Isaiah can exhaust us. In a dog-eat-dog world, their dreams seem simplistic at best, and foolhardy and reckless at worst.

Over the years, a few have been inspired by dreamers like Isaiah. They've worked hard for peace: Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, the Quakers. They climb up on their soap box and preach to us: It's not God's intention for blacks and whites to fight, they say. It's not God's intention for Democrats and Republicans to fight. It's not God's intention for Christians and Muslims to fight. They sound a little like the peacemaking Methodist from Duluth that I heard on MPR not long ago. He asked a simple question, "What if we hadn't retaliated after 9/11, what then?" Then he added, "Will the cycle of violence ever end?"

Dreamers, all of them. But time for a reality check. In the real world, fights break out at kid's soccer games, and not just among the kids but among the parents. In the real world, terrorists plot to bomb Christmas celebrations in Portland. In the real

world, nations invade other nations. It makes me wonder: Is peace even possible in our world?

Isaiah says *yes*. One of the things about Old Testament prophecy like Isaiah is that it doesn't always get fulfilled immediately. Sometimes fulfillment comes years later, sometimes centuries later, sometimes not till the end of time. Sometimes a tree in the forest is as good as dead, just an old, rotting stump. But if you wait long enough, a tender shoot might begin to grow out of that stump. That shoot signifies a king, a new king from the family tree of David, the one they call Prince of Peace. This Prince is a dreamer too. He climbs up on his soapbox and begins to preach: *Blessed are the peacemakers. Turn the other cheek. Love your enemies. Forgive seventy times seven.*

Lo and behold, this Prince of Peace doesn't just dream of peace. In a dog-eat-dog world, he does his best to live it. He cares for the lost and lame. He shows compassion for the frightened and foolish. And he calls any and all who will follow him to be part of a one big family.

What do you think, is peace possible in our world? Maybe if the spirit of the Prince of Peace lives inside of us. Maybe if we follow his example and turn the other cheek and bite our tongue and love our enemies and forgive seventy times seven. Maybe if we work hard for justice between peoples.

Maybe peace is possible. I mean, from time to time we've seen glimpses of it. The Berlin Wall comes crashing down. The United States and Russia become partners on the International Space Station. Nations set aside their differences and gather for World Cup Soccer in South Africa.

And don't stop there. Maybe peace can spread further. Maybe quarrelling coworkers can patch up their differences. Maybe school boards can learn to get along. Maybe husbands and wives can quit fighting. Maybe sisters and brothers can forgive and forget. Maybe parents and teens can work out their problems.

Maybe—with the spirit of the Prince of Peace inside us—there can be peace in our world. So...is it a dream that exhausts us? Or a possibility that inspires us? You decide.

*Branch of Repentance*

December 5, 2010 Advent 2A

Matthew 3:1-12

Pastor Vern Christopherson

John the Baptist comes on the scene shortly before Jesus. He comes to help people get ready. With his camel-skin clothes and his wide-eyed zeal, you expect John to have about as much appeal as the guy standing on the street corner holding up the sign saying, “The end is near!” But the folks come out to hear John in droves. His message hits home. *It’s time to get ready*, he says, *it’s time to clean house*. You can boil it down to a single word: *repent*.

Repent, in case you didn’t know it, means “to change your direction.” Something in your life isn’t right and needs to be different. Put a lid on your gossiping, stop your lying, quit your cheating, no more porn. The change points you in a new direction: Maybe you need to act more and procrastinate less, maybe you need to pray more and worry less, maybe you need to build up more and tear down less. Whatever it is, your life is not all that God intends it to be.

With his message of repentance, John the Baptist is a truth teller. He makes us squirm. Even if we know that we need to clean house, let’s be honest, it’s not much fun to hear it.

Still, I can think of at least a couple of reasons why we need John. For one thing, *we have this amazing capacity to live in denial*. I once read that if we walk by something six times, we don’t see it anymore. Is it true? Is it true in our lives...the strained relationship, the deadness in our hearts, the greed that’s always looking out for number one?

Another reason we need John: *we have a way of comparing ourselves to others so that we come out looking pretty good*. I mean, I have a next-door neighbor whose house is a disaster. Compared to his place, mine is a palace. But if I really stop to look at my house, I begin to notice the peeling paint and spots in the carpet and cracks in the stucco. It could use some serious work.

So why does John tell us to clean house? Not simply to spruce things up, but because *company is coming*. It’s time to get ready.

A few years back, my wife, Brenda, and I invited the Senior Adult Fellowship group from church to come to our house for lunch. I had allowed a few hours to do some cleaning. But you know how it goes. I took an extra phone call at work, returned an email or two, shuffled some paper. Suddenly I had about an hour to get ready, which isn't much time at all.

I did what I could: I worked on the carpet spots, did some dusting, washed the window on the front door, straightened up the magazines. And, when time began to run short, I did what any self-respecting homeowner would do, I shoved everything else into the closet and shut the door.

That was okay, wasn't it? I mean, the senior adults were far too polite to start poking around in my closets. At least, I hoped they were. So no big deal, right, as long as I could find the stuff later?

What's interesting to me is that the company John the Baptist prepares for is not nearly so polite as those senior adults. No, according to John, he might just open up our closets and look inside. Worse yet, he might just probe the insides of our hearts to see what we've hidden away. He might just want to baptize us with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

Repent, John says, it's time to clean house, it's time to get ready. Get out a big trash container and start filling it up. What needs to go in there? Maybe pride, hypocrisy, hatred, impatience. Maybe anger, envy, lust, laziness. Maybe little white lies, big whoppers, and everything in between. How about negligence in worship and prayer and caring for the poor? How about our tendency to spend far too much time getting ready for Christmas and not nearly enough time getting ready for Jesus?

Fill up the dumpster high, John says. It's time to clean house. For company is coming and you need to get ready.