

Isaiah 11: 1-10
Matthew 3: 1-12
December 4, 2016
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church
Second Sunday of Advent

Saturday morning MJ woke me up because she heard me giving distress signals—the sure sign of a nightmare. As nightmares go it was mild. It was also familiar. It was one of those “not being ready” dreams.

In the dream I was the cook in what looked a lot like the kitchen where I worked in college. People were showing up for a meal and giving orders and nothing was prepared. I was rushing around looking for eggs and other necessities and not finding anything. I was looking for the potato product that I would feed into a machine to make French fries. A young man kept coming in to remind me that people were waiting. At the time when MJ woke me up I was yelling at *him*, “*Get with the program!*”

I won’t say that I have these dreams a lot; but they occur several times throughout the year. A recurring example is being in college on the eve of a final exam for a course where I have never been to class or done any of the reading.

When I woke up sufficiently to realize that it had been a dream and not reality, I was struck by how appropriate “I am not ready” dreams are for the Advent season. In the world there is what used to be called the “Christmas rush.” I suppose now we would call it “the holiday rush.” So many people are in a perpetual state of activity: buying presents, decorating, hosting and going to parties, some still sending Christmas cards. There is this sense of underlying stress which while sometimes conscious is often feeling of being driven by a not

entirely friendly energy. The message of the season which brings comfort to some and anxiety to others is this: “Christmas will come whether we are ready or not.”

I propose that the “Christmas rush” is an outer manifestation of an inner and spiritual experience of disquiet—of being “not ready.” I further propose—notice, I *propose*, I do not *declare as fact*—that this inner disquiet has a source which most of us can identify. It is the simultaneous of two states of being. In the first state there is belief in a perfect life where everything fits into place and I know where I fit in and there is harmony within myself and in the world. This is the vision God shares with Isaiah where all the hostility in nature and among people is resolved into a Peaceable Kingdom. It is a lovely vision!

Then there is the scene described by Matthew of John the Baptist by the river. His preaching is anything but harmonious. He is a wild figure with a wild message. He is a man of the wilderness far beyond the neat and settled order of life in the towns of the Roman Empire. In order to hear John’s message one must leave the safety of the ordered world and enter the wilderness—that unfamiliar place with no familiar landmarks. John makes no comforting promises. He merely calls for repentance—a radical reorientation of life. It is the message calling people to “get ready.”

The question for me is this: why would anyone come to the river? Why would anyone leave the comfort of home and the settled routine of life? Why would anyone venture out to wilderness to be immersed in a river by a man of the wilderness? Who would leave the reassuring network of compatible relationships and find one’s self in company with strangers who come from who-knows-what backgrounds and beliefs? Nobody would, unless.... Unless

they felt this disquiet. Unless they felt an emptiness to their lives. Unless they sensed a gnawing hunger in their souls which was awakened by what they heard about John's message.

I believe there must have been a cry from deep within that there must be more to life than *this*; the message of John the Baptist awoke within the hearts of the people an ache, a deep yearning that led them out to the wilderness to hear John and respond to his message.

This morning I ask you to entertain the idea that all of us have wilderness inside of us which will not be domesticated by the outward trappings of civilization and an ordered worldly life. When Henry David Thoreau writes that "the mass of men live lives of quiet desperation," he is speaking of this wilderness. That is why we are not moved by messages which seek to reassure us that all is well and that God loves us as we are when we feel overwhelmed or empty. It is true that God loves us as we are; yet, to put it crudely, "so what?" Such a message invites us to pretend that there is no wilderness and all our emptiness and feelings of failure are curable by the self-help techniques of the day. These are good—but if we do not acknowledge the reality of wilderness they will not address our deepest need for healing and redemption. In the end we often feel more isolated.

Yet Advent is not just about acknowledging our inward wilderness. John announces that one is far greater than he is. In colorful and dramatic images John speaks of one who will separate the wheat from the chaff and gather up the grain while burning the husks. This is what will be necessary for the vision of Isaiah to come true. It is not that some people are pure grain and others chaff. We are both. To embrace Jesus is to be willing to walk through his loving fire.

It will be helpful to prepare ourselves. What is the chaff which keeps us from full life? How do we cultivate a spiritual life which not only awaits Jesus to come but is willing to go meet

him in our wilderness so that he can free us from all that keeps us from real and true life? The message of Advent is not only that Jesus has come; his work is not yet done not only in the world *but in us*. Wouldn't it be great if we made ready? Amen.