

Isaiah 11: 1-10
Matthew 3: 1-12
December 8, 2013
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church

We are entering a season of dangerous texts; but for their very danger they are filled with hope. Actually the danger lies not in the texts but in us and in the culture around us. It is the danger of familiarity. It is the danger of hearing these texts and immediately associating them with the season of the year and all the traditions associated with that season.

Familiarity has caused no longer to hear the texts as they were first heard, with awe and wonder. Instead, at best there is a kind of comfortable reassurance about them, and the service which surrounds them. At worst, they are so separated from day to day life that they are meaningless tinsel hung on the branches of the festival of the holiday season.

Friends as disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ we cannot afford to sleep walk through this season. The light of Christ has become lost in the artificial light of the festival. It shines. The spiritual darkness cannot overcome it; yet it is barely recognizable in a culture which no longer acknowledges God except in slogans and which, in fact worships power and material security.

Who will witness to the *true light* for which humanity longed in the days of Isaiah? Who will tremble with the passion of John the Baptist who was consumed with expectation of the coming of the messiah? Who will testify that this is no quaint myth, but spiritual reality and in Jesus Christ has actually *happened*?

Friends, we are the ones: We and all our sister and brother disciples throughout the world! We are the living body of Christ and therefore God intends his indestructible light to

shine through us and into a world which has mislaid the true gift of the season in the pressing demands of the festival.

I do not say these things to berate you. You are here. You seek the savior. You know the split personality with which we move through the season. You know the strain of trying to hold together the spiritual power of God becoming human with a culture where the only testimony to the songs of the angels comes blaring through speakers in big box stores. No, I do not say these things to berate you—or myself for that matter. I say these things to encourage us! We are not deluded. We are stewards of an incredible gift. We are stewards of the gift that God so loved the world that he gave his only son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life. We are stewards of the gift that God sent the son into the world not to condemn the world; but that through him the world might be saved. God sent Jesus into the world so that we can have kinship with God through Jesus our brother so that with Paul we can exclaim: “See what love the father has for us that we may be called children of God! And so we are!”

Thus it is that we notice that the beautiful words of Isaiah come immediately after God’s promise that the people will be conquered and sent far from home where they will be treated as harshly as they were in Egypt. *Then* God promises that he will bring them home... and a root shall come from the stump of Jesse.... How important it is to understand that these are words of light spoken in a time of spiritual darkness! It is the inevitable consequence of light that we see the shadows not only out there in the world, but as importantly, within ourselves. Indeed I would say that we must begin with ourselves. Otherwise we point to the darkness *out there* as

a way of denying the equally real and unwavering night within ourselves. My shadow is never so long and clear as when I am sitting in judgment of others.

Yet the point of acknowledging the darkness is not to engage in beating up on ourselves. It is simply to acknowledge that as people of flesh we share the same condition as every other creature. We are not surprised by our conflicted and fearful hearts or shocked and appalled that we say and do things which betray our best selves. Because we know that we fall short of God's vision for us we are not discouraged. Instead we experience the greatest of the spiritual virtues which is humility. Humility is the profound knowledge that there is a God and we are not him. We are people who are growing in this knowledge and who seek to cultivate that knowledge. We are people who are inspired that the savior of the world was born in a lowly place where anyone from any state of life would find welcome. Indeed the power of the birth of Jesus in a stable lies, in part, in the fact that it is that of which we are most ashamed, that in which we feel most unworthy which is in fact *most welcome* in the lowly cattle stall.

It is the very birth of Jesus in this place away from the warmth and protection of the inn which creates the community of which Isaiah spoke—a community of shepherds and angels, oxen, cows, sheep and donkeys, and then all who were drawn from the comfort of the inn to be present at the birth of the child.

Did they understand what was happening? How could they? Could they understand why they were there? I believe that gathered at that moment there were as many thoughts and desires as there were people. What I believe they shared was awe and wonder. It is something that our culture has lost in its quest for rational, logical truth. Logic, rationality and the belief in only what we can see and touch or make sense of has overthrown our capacity to walk through

life with jaw dropping amazement. It is why children are our prophets at this time of year and why we must tell them the story of the birth of Jesus with as much awe and wonder and sense of mystery as we can call from our hearts.

Friends today I ask that you recognize that the hospitality which surrounded the birth of Jesus envelops you now. It transforms our gathering from a collection of unrelated individuals who happen to show up at this place from time to time to a community of people wonder and wonder; whose wondering and wondering has led us to a place at once far distant in time and material reality, yet which as near to us as our own heartbeats. And not so much a place as the awareness of a presence in which we feel the awakening of wonder, hope and the sense that there is a realm of life of an entirely different nature than the one which demands our allegiance in day to day life.

Let us draw near. Let us dare to open our hearts to kingdom brought in by the birth of a baby. Let us seek to dwell in his presence and in that realm when we sleep and when we rise.
Amen.