



St. Paul's Episcopal Church - Delray Beach, Florida

2 Advent - Year A - December 8/9, 2007

**Isaiah 11:1-10; Ps. 72:1-7,18-19; Romans 15:4-13; Matthew 3:1-12**

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### Paradoxical Hopes, Contrasting Expectations!

The December 3, 2007 issue of *Time Magazine* had a fascinating cover story titled “What Makes Us Good/Evil?”<sup>1</sup> Did anyone read the story? “Morality and empathy are writ deep in our genes,” it said on the article’s first page and continued, “Alas, so are savagery and bloodlust. Science is now learning what makes us noble and terrible – and perhaps, what can make us better.”<sup>2</sup> Intriguing, don’t you think?

It is a provocative article and one which raises as many questions as it answers, perhaps even more. “If the entire human species were a single individual, that person would long ago have been declared mad,” the opening sentence of the article stated.<sup>3</sup> It continued, “The insanity would not lie in the darkness of the human mind – though it can be a dark and raging place indeed. And it certainly wouldn’t lie in the transcendent goodness of that mind – one so sublime, we fold it into a larger ‘soul.’ The madness would lie instead in the fact that both of these qualities, the savage and the splendid, can exist in one creature, one person, often in one instant.”<sup>4</sup>

The balance of the article details current scientific research into moral understanding and moral decision making, of how the brain functions in all of this, of the vitally important role of community in establishing our moral codes of conduct, and of what goes wrong when the brain and the community go awry, producing the Adolph Hitlers and Joseph Stalins of the world. The article made an observation that particularly caught my attention.

It stated that we human beings “face our biggest challenges not when we’re called to behave ourselves within our family, community or workplace, but when we have to apply the same moral care to people outside our tribe.”<sup>5</sup> “The notion of the ‘other’ is a tough one for *homo sapiens*,” the authors of the article write.<sup>6</sup>

How true this is. History has born witness to this over and over again....Anyway, the article is fascinating and as I said, it seems to raise more questions than it answers, but it does end with a glimmer of hope. In concluding the article, the authors write, “For grossly imperfect creatures like us, morality may be the steepest of all developmental mountains. Our opposable thumbs and big brains give us the tools to dominate the planet, but wisdom comes more slowly than physical hardware. We surely have a lot of killing and savagery ahead of us before we fully civilize ourselves. The hope – a realistic one, perhaps – is that the struggles still to come are fewer than those left behind.”<sup>7</sup>

*A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.*

(Isaiah 11:1-2)

The prophet Isaiah is expressing a word of deep hope. It is the people's deep hope. It is God's deep hope. It is the common and deeply held hope of both God and the people for a new kind of king to usher in a new kind of age, God's peaceable kingdom. This king's delight "shall be in the fear of the LORD," the poet prophet says. "He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth" (Isaiah 11:3).

This king will not use weapons of war, his words will be enough to accomplish his purposes (Isaiah 11:4). "Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins" (Isaiah 11:5). And when this righteous and faithful king comes, and when the peaceable kingdom is inaugurated, the whole of the creation will be re-ordered:

*The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them...The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea. On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious (Isaiah 11:6-10).*

Can you imagine such a day? Wouldn't it, indeed, be glorious?

There is scholarly disagreement about the time and context of this wonderful passage from Isaiah. Some believe it comes from the time of the original prophet, who lived in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC and who prophesied when the Northern Tribes of Israel and the Southern Tribes of Judah were still in existence and still had existing monarchies.<sup>8</sup> In this view, Israel and Judah have been governed by a series of corrupt and faithless rulers. The prophet offers a contrast for the people and "projects the expectation of ideal ruler into the distant future."<sup>9</sup>

Others hold that this passage comes from a time much later than the original Isaiah, but that it is consistent with his thought and theology. In this view, the passage was written after both the Northern Kingdom and the Southern Kingdom had ceased to exist, when the people of Judah were in exile in Babylon, that is, sometime after 587 B.C.<sup>10</sup>

The monarchy is no longer and this unknown prophet of the Isaiah "school" expressed the longing for a restoration of the line of King David, who was the son of Jesse, thus explaining the reference to the "shoot coming forth from the stump of Jesse" (Isaiah 11:1). It is a stump because the monarchy had been conquered and vanquished by the Babylonians. Despite this, the people held onto the hope of its restoration because God had promised that David's line would last forever (See 2 Samuel 7:11-13).

While the prophet who wrote it, may not have intended it, we in the Christian church cannot hear this passage without connecting it to Jesus and understanding his coming as the fulfillment of the prophesy. And in our tradition, we are not thinking only of Christ's coming 2000 years ago, we also have in mind a notion of his coming again.

We are called to be a people waiting; waiting in hope. Not merely waiting for the coming of Christmas Day and its explosion of ribbons and wrapping and gifts. We are to hope for Jesus' coming, Jesus as the ideal king, the shoot from the stump of David. Jesus, the king longed for in Isaiah's passage. Jesus, who will usher in the peaceable kingdom. This coming could be at any time, even here, now today.

Of course we do hear another cry of expectation, a jarring cry. We hear the upraised voice of John the Baptist, shouting out, hollering, "Repent! Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near!" (Matthew 3:2). John too was preparing the people for the coming of a new king, a Messiah.

John's vision of who this King would be is in sharp contrast to that which we heard in Isaiah. John's king will come in judgment and wrath. And not even the religious establishment will escape this...When Sadducees and Pharisees come out to John to see what he is up to, he berates them, "You brood of vipers! Who told you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance!" (Matthew 3:7-8).

He lets them know that the purity of their Jewish heritage will not be sufficient to assuage God's anger.... "Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham" (Matthew 3:9). It is a fair warning to any to those of any age who claim the that the privileges of lineage offer and refuse the demands of personal responsibility not only for themselves but for the larger society as well.

John lets all those who come out to him know that there is no time to waste, "Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire" (Matthew 3:10). John gives them insight into the kind of King he believes is coming, saying to them, "I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire" (Matthew 3:11 - 12).

John's expectation is for a messianic king to come with fire and judgment and we, the Christian Church, understand John to be the prophet who prepared the way for the coming of Jesus in fulfillment of John's expectation....It's why we read about him every year at this time.

While I am confident that we are right to hear John as the forerunner of the messianic king and "preparer of the way" for that king, I can't help recognizing that when he came, Jesus' kingship was very different than what John had expected and for which he had prepared his listeners. The tone of Jesus' kingship, of his preaching and teaching, his "coronation," marked by a crown of thorns and not a crown of gold, fit much more neatly with Isaiah's vision and expectation.

Among Christians today, there are different understandings of Jesus and his kingship and there are different expectations concerning his coming, just as there were among Jews of the first century. There are those today who are calling for the "terrible day of the Lord" who want to see Jesus swoop in with clouds and thunder, fire and brimstone, bringing judgment to the world and putting all sinners to an instant and painful death and condemning them to a tortuous eternal hell. That's certainly the dominant hope among many evangelicals and Biblical fundamentalists....

Perhaps they should take warning from the prophet Amos who cautioned those who desired such a "day of the Lord" (See Amos 5:18 ff). Amos recognized that people who called for this kind of judgment with such zeal, vitriolic anger and hatred would themselves fall under the same judgment.

When we human beings start name calling and labeling others in such a way that they are dehumanized, when we start taking it upon ourselves to decide for God who is subject to wrath and judgment and who is not, we invariably get into trouble...Moreover, it is always a false distinction. As St. Paul pointedly reminds us, "all have sinned, all fall short of the glory of God"

(Romans 3:23). We are all in constant need of God's mercy and forgiveness. We should always pray for these rather than for God's judgment....

The second Sunday of Advent presents us with two very different readings, two paradoxical expectations, two very different hopes. For Isaiah, the hope is universal. It is not merely for human beings, or for the particular tribes of Israel. No, the king Isaiah hopes for, hopes for on behalf of the people, hopes for on behalf of God, is one who come to reorder the whole creation in righteousness and peace.

John's messianic hope is for a judge. And John is not wrong, the world is filled with sin, and there is a deep need for judgment and repentance....After all, think of a society in which a teenage boy walks into a mall crowded with Christmas shoppers and opens fire with an AK-47 as happened in Omaha this past week. What kind of world have we created? Yes, there is a deep need for judgment and repentance...And actually, in truth, the judgment has already occurred, the world was found guilty, and Christ was sent to reconcile the world to God through his cross and resurrection....

Advent is a time when we need to remember this and look deeply into ourselves, recognizing that we all have need to be saved - to repent and to be restored and reconciled to God all the time....That's what being in relationship with Jesus is about...We cannot and should not ignore John's warning, as heated as it is....

Still, I am troubled by John's name calling, by his vitriol, by his dehumanizing of others. I don't think this can ever be right and I suspect it is rarely, if ever, helpful. I find myself drawn, instead, to Isaiah and to his hope....I suspect you do to...

With the authors of the *Time Magazine* article, don't we hope and pray that "the struggles still to come are fewer than those left behind?"<sup>11</sup> Do we not have a deep longing for that day when people will not hurt or destroy on God's holy mountain or anywhere else on the earth? Do we not all pray for that day when the root of Jesse, Jesus, shall stand not as a symbol of bitter divisiveness, but as a signal to all peoples? Do we not yearn for that time when all nations shall inquire of him confident that their inquiry will lead to love and peace rather than hatred and violence and destruction, a day when we will show as much concern for the tribe of the other as we do our own?

But, note this and note it well...We cannot just hope and pray for all these things, we must also act. You see, although *Time Magazine* didn't report this in their story, God has given us free will and created us to act morally. As people of faith, it is our confidence that the "primal understanding of good and bad, of right and wrong, of what it means to suffer not only our own pain, but also the pain of others,"<sup>12</sup> is hardwired into us by divine design. This places a sacred obligation upon us.

We must not only hope rightly and think morally, we must act on that hope and behave in accordance with our moral understanding, attaching ourselves to Jesus, that shoot from Jesse, who is the source of all our hope and our morals and also the pioneer and perfecter of our faith...

Advent is here...Jesus, the shoot from the stump of Jesse, is coming anew...What is your hope this year? What is your expectation this Christmas? What kind of king do you see coming your way? How will you act as you await him? These are the questions of Advent.

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<sup>1</sup> **Error! Main Document Only.**Kluger, Jeffrey, et al “What Makes Us Moral” *Time Magazine* (December 3, 2007), 52 - 58,60.

2 “What Makes Us Moral? 52

3. “What Makes Us Moral?” 52

4. “What Makes Us Moral?” 52

5. “What Makes Us Moral?” 60

6. “What Makes Us Moral?” 60

7. “What Makes Us Moral?” 60

8. See Jensen, Joseph and Irwin, William H on Isaiah 11:1-10 in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990) 237.

9. Jensen, Joseph and Irwin, William H. - Isaiah 11:1-10 in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* ed. Raymond Brown *et al* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990) 237.

10. See Ackroyd, Peter R “Isaiah” in *The Interpreters One-Volume Commentary on the Bible* ed. Charles M. Laymon (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1971), 340.

11. “What Makes Us Moral” 60

12. “What Makes Us Moral” 52