

Sermon: 2019/12/08 (2nd Sunday of Advent, Year A) - *Isaiah* 11:1-10; *Psalms* 72:1-7, 18-19; *Romans* 15:4-13; & *Matthew* 3:1-12_BTR

[Invite children to the front. Stick in a plant-pot; a hatchet; a watering-can full of black, ugly-looking fluid.]

Today in our gospel-reading, we hear John the Baptist, a distant cousin of Jesus', talking about why it is that Jesus - God's eternal Son - needs to come back to create everything new; for a "do-over."

And, for the purposes of this explanation, John describes humanity as being like a tree.

A "tree" like this one:

[Place plant-pot with stick center-stage.]

Oh dear: it doesn't look very healthy, does it?

[Wait for response.]

No?

Well, maybe I should water it then?

As a good gardener would do, right?

["Water" the stick with molasses, marmite or something.]

What's wrong?

You don't think that helped?

Why not?

[Wait for response.]

It looked like pollution, didn't it?

Well, my attempts to "fix" myself & others are like that horrid, black "water" that came out from the watering-can:

Which is to say: What I do in *this* life - even the good I attempt to do - is always somewhat polluted by my sin; by my selfishness and self-love.

So, even though I might *want* to help this "tree-of-humanity," I'm also responsible

for the poor state it is in!

Which is why we hear Jesus remind us that '[e]ven now the axe is lying at [its] root...':

A little tender care *isn't* enough; a small improvement here or there *isn't* enough: What is needed is a *brand new everything!* - including a *brand new you and me.*

Let's pray:
Lord God, ...

[Dismiss children.]

The prophet Isaiah was *really* a rather *remarkable* person.

In *many* ways this is true.

I'm going to focus on just *one* of those ways in which I think he is "remarkable," but let's first eliminate that other unusual thing about him that also might earn this compliment:

His *extraordinary* long life! - Exemplified by; *reflected* in the *extraordinarily* long length of the book of his recorded prophecies: *sixty-six* chapters of them.

In size, Jeremiah's own work - a contemporary - comes close, it is true, but Isaiah's preaching dwarfs that of *all* other prophets (and many other (Scriptural) texts too);

it represents a *mammoth* effort;

it seems to dominate *half* of the Old Testament, so that if you were to throw down your Bible onto a table right now, in such a way that it just happened to fall open, I would bet (money) that the visible pages - that the exposed section - would be either Psalms *or* Isaiah.

It is huge!

And it was written - probably not (directly) by himself but by an admirer; a pupil - over *many* decades.

Isaiah was born after the Davidic kingdom had been divided; he was born in the southern "half," in "Judah," in what is now modern Israel, on the eastern edge of the Mediterranean, sometime whilst King Uzziah was on the throne of Jerusalem. We can't be sure *exactly* when, because he doesn't tell us.

What he does specify is that he began *prophesying* during the final year of that ruler's reign, so about 739 B. C.

Uzziah had had a *very* successful tenure in the palace - fifty-two years! [2 Chr. 26:3]

Indeed, it was 'a period of...calm' for the whole land [n.1], which "prospered." [2 Chr. 26:5]

He added fortifications to his cities, *and* built *stout* watch-towers *deep* in the desert to warn against - *and repulse* - the incursions of the Arabs: [2 Chr. 26:7,9-10].

The army received better equipment and was drilled; and on the walls of the capital were set war-machines: [2 Chr. 26:11-15a].

Everyone, therefore, despite the recent, *tragic* division (of the nation), had begun to feel a *new* confidence - a new confidence that sprang from seeing not only that Uzziah was a practical, sensible, "can-do" leader, but a leader that, the Chronicler tells us, was a *true*-believer; a God-fearer.

And that faith - that there really was a Divine-creator who was judging Uzziah, holding Uzziah accountable for his actions, kept him honest and hard-working: [2 Chr. 26:4-5].

Then, suddenly, *terrifyingly* the situation "lurched sideways."

That is to say, newly confident, resurgent Judah was "rocked" by a scandal that no one saw coming: Uzziah was stricken by leprosy and went mad.

(These ailments don't have a direct connection to one another, but both happened anyway.)

Uzziah lived for quite a few more years, but he was treated as an outcast - it was like a *living*-death, banished to solitary-confinement, locked away and ignored.

His son, Jotham, *a good boy*, took control - not officially at first, of course.

And did quite well.

He even defeated an invasion by the Ammonites who sought to exploit what they thought was a power-vacuum "at the top."

But what Isaiah was given to see was that (King) Uzziah's years of health and productivity, which had alleviated the shame about the split in the Kingdom, was a "blip;"

an exception to the rule.

God's disappointment in the Israelites for failing to *maintain* what Moses and Joshua and the other patriarchs created in Canaan - that is to say, a *single*, safe, *holy* state for the Jewish people - was *not* going to be avoided:

His judgement was coming and couldn't be reversed.

The dye was cast in the water;

the well was polluted:

I remember when Rebekah, Poppy and I were driving to Iowa for the first time.

We had been in Nashville where I had undertaken an "internship" at St.

Bartholomew's Episcopal church, and we were somewhere in western Illinois, I think.

Wherever it was, it was *flat*.
Like an ironing-board.
And the horizon was vast.
And I'd never seen anything like it!
In England, there are hills pretty much *everywhere* disrupting the view.
And houses.
And farms.
It can feel quite claustrophobic, actually.
But *there* it was like we were a lonely boat in a "sea" of grass that stretched away
in every direction.
And in the far distance we could see a storm.
Miles *and miles* away.
The rain was like a dark, grey curtain.
And it didn't reach us for, like, twenty minutes.
We got to enjoy, therefore, a little more sunshine, but our fate was inevitable.

Something like this "dawns" on Isaiah.
And yet he struggled to convince his contemporaries.
Their gaze; their focus was on the present.
But he didn't give up!
And he lived almost a century - *or more(!)* - repeating the warning over and over
again.
In fact, Isaiah's ministry lasted so long that modern scholars struggle to accept
that all of the writings we have in his book are from him:
If you delve into the literature, you will find references to "*deutero-Isaiah*," and
even "*trito-Isaiah*."
And maybe somebody else - that "admirer" I mentioned who actually penned
Isaiah's prophecies - took over and posed as his old teacher.
Or maybe God preserved the (original) prophet by a miracle.
Is that so far-fetched?
If He can design the laws of physics and biology, He can also bend them to allow a
faithful servant to continue in that faithfulness, no?
This is the first thing that is so "remarkable" about Isaiah.

But the thing that might be even more "remarkable" about Isaiah, is - or rather,
was - his evident willingness to say the things that God gave him to say.
His visions, I'm talking about.
Those visions inspired in his mind and mouth by the Holy Spirit, which, famously,
came upon him in the Temple in the appearance of a cherubim brandishing tongs
with a burning coal: [Is. 6:1-8].

Isaiah was bidden to proclaim things that, to him, *and to everyone else listening*,
must have sounded *ludicrous*; absurd; laughable.

Just put yourself in his shoes -

I mean, look again at what he was asked to say this morning:

'The wolf shall live with the lamb'?!'

'[T]he leopard shall lie down with the [goat-]kid'?!'

'[A] lion shall eat straw like the ox.'?!'

Isaiah must have felt like celebrities do in those concealed-, candid-camera, "Gotcha," "Punk-ed" TV shows, right?

Sometimes those celebrities - usually minor ones - are deceived into thinking that they're taking part in an audition for something terribly important - like raising money for a charity, and they're handed a script by an actor to say lines which make them sound stupid or foolish.

Have you ever come across this sort of thing?

Some celebrities or members of the public get "wise" very quickly, and start looking round to see if they can't spot a film-crew lurking behind a corner.

But others persevere until the star of the show - Ashton Kutcher, Jonathan Blitt, Dom Joly, or whomever - jumps out and tells them it is all a joke at their expense. Yet Isaiah isn't a fool.

He understands what leopards and lions and wolves are like better than we do: They were an everyday reality in ancient, Bronze-Age Judah:

Don't forget how Samson almost got eaten on the way to market, once.

Isaiah, therefore, felt the incredulity that we do (hearing such odd things).

He understood what he was proclaiming, *and* how idiotic onlookers and friends and family probably thought he was.

And this problem also would have grown and grown as time passed and the situation deteriorated:

If Isaiah's words, then, that God had a plan not just to *fix* the world but to *improve* it - that's the subtext of a lion eating straw rather than people, right? - would have "struck" those around him as silly when he began saying them at the thrilling height of Uzziah's reign, how much more ridiculous when the Babylonians came and deported even the prophet himself.

But the point was to do as he had been commanded to do, "come rain or shine" - to preach the Good News of a loving God who has an "endgame" beyond our *wildest* hopes.

And this holds true for you and me this Advent.

Footnotes:

1. Noth, Martin (1958), *The History of Israel*, translated by Stanley Godman, London: Adam & Charles Black, 236.

