

Isaiah 11:1-10

A shoot will grow up from the stump of Jesse;
a branch will sprout^[a] from his roots.

²The Lord's spirit will rest upon him,
a spirit of wisdom and understanding,
a spirit of planning and strength,
a spirit of knowledge and fear of the Lord.

³He will delight in fearing the Lord.
He won't judge by appearances,
nor decide by hearsay.

⁴He will judge the needy with righteousness,
and decide with equity for those who suffer in the land.
He will strike the violent^[b] with the rod of his mouth;
by the breath of his lips he will kill the wicked.

⁵Righteousness will be the belt around his hips,
and faithfulness the belt around his waist.

⁶The wolf will live with the lamb,
and the leopard will lie down with the young goat;
the calf and the young lion will feed together,
and a little child will lead them.

⁷The cow and the bear will graze.
Their young will lie down together,
and a lion will eat straw like an ox.

⁸A nursing child will play over the snake's hole;
toddlers will reach right over the serpent's den.

⁹They won't harm or destroy anywhere on my holy mountain.
The earth will surely be filled with the knowledge of the Lord,
just as the water covers the sea.

¹⁰On that day, the root of Jesse will stand as a signal to the peoples. The nations will seek him out, and his dwelling will be glorious.

Romans 15

⁴Whatever was written in the past was written for our instruction so that we could have hope through endurance and through the encouragement of the scriptures. ⁵May the God of endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude toward each other, similar to Christ Jesus' attitude. ⁶That way you can glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ together with one voice.

⁷So welcome each other, in the same way that Christ also welcomed you, for God's glory. ⁸I'm saying that Christ became a servant of those who are circumcised for the sake of God's truth, in order to confirm the promises given to the ancestors, ⁹and so that the Gentiles could glorify God for his mercy. As it is written,
*Because of this I will confess you among the Gentiles,
and I will sing praises to your name.*^[b]

¹⁰And again, it says,
Rejoice, Gentiles, with his people.^[c]

¹¹And again,
*Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles,
and all the people should sing his praises.*^[d]

¹² And again, Isaiah says,
*There will be a root of Jesse,
who will also rise to rule the Gentiles.
The Gentiles will place their hope in him.*^[e]

¹³ May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in faith so that you overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Matthew 3

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the desert of Judea announcing, ² "Change your hearts and lives! Here comes the kingdom of heaven!" ³ He was the one of whom Isaiah the prophet spoke when he said:

*The voice of one shouting in the wilderness,
"Prepare the way for the Lord;
make his paths straight."*^[a]

⁴ John wore clothes made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist. He ate locusts and wild honey.

⁵ People from Jerusalem, throughout Judea, and all around the Jordan River came to him. ⁶ As they confessed their sins, he baptized them in the Jordan River. ⁷ Many Pharisees and Sadducees came to be baptized by John. He said to them, "You children of snakes! Who warned you to escape from the angry judgment that is coming soon? ⁸ Produce fruit that shows you have changed your hearts and lives. ⁹ And don't even think about saying to yourselves, Abraham is our father. I tell you that God is able to raise up Abraham's children from these stones. ¹⁰ The ax is already at the root of the trees. Therefore, every tree that doesn't produce good fruit will be chopped down and tossed into the fire. ¹¹ I baptize with water those of you who have changed your hearts and lives. The one who is coming after me is stronger than I am. I'm not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. ¹² The shovel he uses to sift the wheat from the husks is in his hands. He will clean out his threshing area and bring the wheat into his barn. But he will burn the husks with a fire that can't be put out."

Sermon

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.

Everybody belongs in the Kingdom of God, but not everything. That's the Advent lesson of today. Wolves and lambs, leopards and goats, children and snakes, everybody belongs in the kingdom of God. But not every thing, and certainly not everything that they do.

One of my former professors, Dr. Amy Laura Hall, recently posted a simple statement on Facebook that's stuck with me for weeks now. "Mortality is not the natural order of things." That struck me because, well, because science would look at that claim in bewilderment before laughing at its face value. Our experience indicates that mortality **IS** the natural order of things. Even before Darwin's Theory Evolution became common knowledge, humanity

simply knew that all earthly creatures naturally experienced death. In nature, everything eventually dies, and so death seems inherent to the natural order.

What Dr. Hall pointed to, however – and I missed this at first – was that the birth of Jesus signals a new world order where even what seems obviously true is challenged by the not so obvious power that's swaddled in Bethlehem's manger. I missed at first that her statement grew out of grief at the death of a friend, that she claimed this radical truth in the face of what seems like necessarily sufficient evidence to the contrary. Death seems natural. Life seems tragically limited rather than abundant, which puts resurrection on the edge of absurd.

But when we celebrate a season like Advent, year after year we expect the impossible to break in to the mundane possibilities of our lives. We're here looking for the most unnatural of things according to the prevailing wisdom of

our day: we're looking for the incarnation of the divine, for God to become a human being. That's natural for God's kingdom, but not our experience of the universe. The world that breaks in to our world brings with it a new normal, so what seems natural to in this world is, sometimes, unnatural within the Kingdom of God. Even the most accepted normalcies in our world go topsy turvy when Jesus shows up, because Jesus changes the very nature of the world.

“You're only human.” That's the consolation we tend to offer people when they falter, when they fail, especially when they hurt others. We point to the frailty of our condition as natural, as something we all expect. You did break her heart unexpectedly, but you're only human. You did yell at your father unnecessarily, but you're only human. You did squander all your family's money in bad investments and gambling, but you're only human. This has become one of those throwaway phrases in our verbiage that's used

so often that it barely seems to mean anything, except we allow it to fool us into thinking our natural condition is harm.

Perhaps we do this to hide ourselves from more pain, or especially, more shame. "I'm only human." That's a pitiful consolation. Of course, as humans, we're limited, but we're meant for so much more than injury to ourselves and grievance to others. We may hide our egos from shame with this statement, but we end up shaming our entire spiritual species. In God's Kingdom a lion cannot mutter "I'm only a leo" as she feasts on the calf, nor can the wolf lick his lips and claim, "I'm only a canine" as he glares at the lamb. Everybody belongs in God's kingdom, but not everything. Death, destruction, hate, violence, prejudice, things such as these do not belong in God's kingdom. So, no more can we claim that "we're only human" to escape our destiny of transformation because in Jesus God is changing the natural order of things.

The definition of our lives belongs not to scientists, nor to dictionaries, but to a baby who will soon be born in a barn. We're called to prepare the way for this Lord, which means we're called to blaze a new trail toward a new nature.

Lutherans often fear a theology of works. In other words, we often avoid any statements that might suggest our salvation depends on us. This is right and good because we know and trust that God is the one who accomplishes salvation on our behalf. Only God could change the very nature of the world, could remake the fabric of creation, such that children and snakes could play without fear of one another, such that mortality is not the natural order of things. But, when taken to the inappropriate extreme, that also leads us to a passive experience of faith, where we forget that we're called not just to receive God's forgiveness, but to live Christ's life. We're actors as Christians, called not just to receive the Lord but to prepare the Lord's way. We're

called not just to embrace God's Kingdom but to behave in ways that reflect that Kingdom's come.

We all belong in God's Kingdom and to prepare the way for God it's time to start purging our lives of the things that don't belong in God's Kingdom. An essential reminder here is this: we're called to work on ourselves and inspire others into transformation, not demand their compliance. We're called to invite others into the beauty of God's new nature, but we can't force change on others, nor should we try. Instead, we should live lives so committed to the new nature that it shapes the way that we act and the way that we speak, so much so that people will wonder just what it is that we've got and they'll want more of it themselves. We're called to prepare the way of the Lord with what seems to this world a most unnatural beauty, and through that we'll all find out it is the most natural thing in the Kingdom of God.

What lays before us this Advent, in this season of preparation, is how we prepare for a world that sometimes seems unnatural to us. That begins with, in the words of our confession, an honest assessment of our brokenness and a radical trust in God's grace. We must look to our tendencies to eat the sheep in our pastures, to harass the calves in our fields, to poison the children in our neighborhoods, and realize that those behaviors never belong in God's kingdom. Poisoned water in Flint, violation of tribal land in Standing Rock, KKK parades in the VA/NC border, intimate partner violence in our universities, seniors with limited incomes having to choose either food or medicine – these things don't belong in God's Kingdom. The wolf, the leopard, the lion, even the snake belong in God's Kingdom, but the destructive behaviors we often associate with them simply do not.

Another part of preparation, perhaps even more difficult than the behavioral change, is to trust that wolves can lay down with lambs, that death is not the natural order of things. Part of the beauty the church has to offer is a reality alternative to the homophobia and racism and xenophobia so common to our world. When these things seem natural, the church professes that not only can a lion eat straw with the oxen, but that the people in the KKK will forsake their hatred, take off their pointed hats, and instead put on the garments of Christ's inclusion. That children who fear sharing their identities would find families that choose to embrace them rather than condemn them. That the church would stand up and be brave in the face of any kind of supremacy or injustice, saying that in the Kingdom of God it is entirely unnatural to prefer one race, or one gender, or one sexuality, or any one's self interest over the other. The beauty of God's advent is that those with power to hurt

others **lose that ability**, that those with privilege **sacrifice it for the sake of those without.**

Tonight, we continue our Advent discussions on the future of ministry at CLC and the different possibilities that might mean abundant life for us. Anytime we consider the future and the kind of change necessary, we might encounter options that feel entirely unnatural, but we must remember that does not mean it's outside of God's will. God in Christ redefines what's natural as Jesus redefines the very world in which we live.

As we explore together, we'll proclaim as a community that everyone belongs in God's Kingdom but that not everything that seems natural here is native to God's realm. We'll remember that God's kingdom is a place where even mortality is not the natural order of things, that new life is the norm over against death. Rather than say, "we're only human," we'll declare together that we're created in the

image of the image of the invisible God, that we're meant for life abundant, and that we're committed to finding that together. Fortunately for us, Jesus is intent on bringing it to us as well, so as we prepare the way for God, God's preparing the way to Bethlehem. Thank God, we'll meet at the manger along with everyone who belongs in God's Kingdom. Amen.