

December 4, 2022 2nd Sunday of Advent
Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope

Isaiah 11:1-10, Romans 15:4-13
Matthew 3:1-12

[The Christian Century, December 2022, In the lectionary for December 4, by Montague Williams;

Hope Calls: Advent action for climate justice, a section by Grant Stevenson <http://www.ulch.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Hope-Calls-Digital-Draft.pdf>; Daniel Erlander in *Manna and Mercy*, chapter 16. Ideas from Working Preacher and Sermon Brainwave:

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/second-sunday-of-advent/commentary-on-matthew-31-12-6>

Mapping, Mending, and Stirred by the Spirit

Grace and peace beloved of Christ Jesus. Amen

Over Thanksgiving we visited our family in the hills of New Hampshire.

We hadn't been out to their home since Thanksgiving of 2019, before COVID, it was time.

One evening my brother-in-law, John, told a story I didn't recall hearing before.

He was remembering the first trip that he and my now-sister-in-law, Sarah,
took to the east coast, 20 years ago.

They were spending that year on the other side of the country, at Holden Village,
the Lutheran retreat center deep in the Cascade mountains of Washington State:
John as Head Maverick, Sarah as a Lead Cook.

(Some of you are smiling, I know, imagining this scene unfolding.)

As John and Sarah began to plan for life-after-Holden and graduate school programs,
a trip east became essential.

They flew into Boston, a city notorious for its confusing navigation.

They rented a car.

They mapped out the circuit of schools and grad programs they would visit all around the region.

Easier said than done, for the roads and highways are a tangle
and they didn't have the luxury of Google Maps on their phones.

This way or that, left or right, east or west, 2nd turn and then what?

I imagine their tempers were frayed.

As John tells it now, laughing hard, they stopped for lunch at a pizza place
and asked the fellow behind the counter for directions.

"Sure, of course."

He got out a Sharpie and unfolded a paper napkin
and drew a line all the way across and to the edge of the napkin.

Then he reached for *another* napkin and unfolded that one,
and with his Sharpie, he continued the line!

Part way across the open napkin, he angled the line to the right and (finally) came to a stop.

"There you have it," he said pointing:

"Take this road straight for a ways.

And then turn right onto the entrance ramp for the interstate".

John walked away, shaking his head, the bifurcated napkins in his hand.

Was the guy teasing them? Mocking them?

Was he such a local that it just seemed natural? What's to question? Where's the confusion?

Did the fellow miscalculate the scale of his drawing and that's why he kept adding napkins?

Could the route really be this obvious? And just a nightmare to John and Sarah?

20 years later and my brother-in-law is still laughing, still shaking his head,
still trying to make sense of that interaction.

"Prepare the way of the Lord, make the path straight."

On this second Sunday of Advent,
we are introduced again to the scraggly, camel-hair wearing, locust-eating, John the Baptist.
Truth be told, dear ones, it can feel a little like getting directions from that pizza-place-fellow
with his ample supply of Sharpies and a thick stack of napkins.
John the Baptist makes it sound so simple. Repent! Prepare the way.
And we, from a different time in history, a different geography, different sensibilities,
are left to make meaning for our lives, our community, here, now.

Today's scriptures, I believe, are about identity.

In John the Baptist's time, his reference to Isaiah would have spoken volumes:
Here's John the messenger, a prophet himself, quoting the well-known, poetic words of the prophet Isaiah.
Oh, they'd recognize it, they'd know.
It would have conjured in the people the muscle memory of their ancestors.
Stories passed from generation to generation around campfires.
The painful stories of exile in Babylon,
the liberative stories of freedom from slavery,
the providential stories of care in the wilderness.
In just a few words, John the Baptist is linking them to their past and truly their present and future.
This is who we are, he reminds them: Prepare, Repent.

So two reflections and a prayer:

First, bearing fruit worthy of repentance.

Did you sense the chill in the air when the Pharisees and Sadducees arrived at the River Jordan?
John's tone changed sharply.
While the people who had ventured out from the city were curious and eager, and John met them easily,
these religious elites came with baggage that John the Baptist surely knew from a mile away.
They brought a sense of righteous rigidity, right and wrong,
and in many cases a rejection of John's (and later Jesus') justice for the poor, the excluded.
With strong words, John challenges these religious leaders, *and we who are comfortable*:
John cries, bear fruit worthy of repentance: mercy, peacemaking, a thirst for justice.

Professor Montague Williams notes something that we hear and sense around this community:

that *young* people (and I would say *many* people)
are "deeply interested in the God found in scripture
but have had too many encounters with churches or church leaders
that seem to contradict that God."
He concludes, "They are leaving church to find church."

Dear friends, I mention this, for it is clarifying in a powerfully Advent, John the Baptist way.

The fruits of repentance that we bear, have to do with identity, identity as a community:
a community that tells the truth about who this saving Jesus is,
about what it means *to us* to follow him,
and about the fruit, the change, the action, that we must bear, that we must BE, in the world.
In these last weeks,
particularly as we've stepped out as People of Faith for Reproductive Rights,
I've heard your faithful, clarifying, public witness, your fruits of repentance.

Second reflection: The earth will be *full* of the knowledge of the Lord.

Our God is concerned with redeeming all of creation, humanity AND the whole cosmos.
This Advent, with other Minneapolis churches and MN350,
we're invited to nudge the City of Minneapolis in the People's Climate and Equity Plan.

You can read more about the plan <http://www.ulch.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Hope-Calls-Digital-Draft.pdf>,
but it's based on a goal of 100% carbon free buildings in the city by 2030.
And it relies on Federal Inflation Reduction Act money and Minneapolis investment.
Think local Green New Deal.

If you choose to join in, you'll get a prompt each week, a little script of sorts.
Once a week you make a phone call to a city council member, and another to the mayor.
Some of you don't live in Minneapolis, but you *worship* in Minneapolis.
So you can call City Council Member Rainville, for he represents this area where you worship.

As Grant Stevenson wrote in the booklet,

I know it can feel complicated, like you don't know enough,
but honestly, it counts to call after hours and simply leave a message.
He went on: "You are an expert...not a policy expert, but you are an expert on your life.
You are an expert on what kind of a world you want to live in
and what kind of a world you want to leave to the next generation.
You're an expert on why the climate crisis is terrifying to you
and you're an expert on the urgency you feel to do something big and visionary about it."

This is the world toward which John the Baptist and Jesus call us.

It can be tangled and messy. We may get lost.
"Turn," they say, but which way? Prepare, but how?
The supply of Sharpies and the stack of napkins and the guy at the pizza place might only get you so far 😊

But, my friends, the call of this season is full-bodied, and it has to do with our core identity.

We are asked to "share in God's work of mending creation."
I love this image of *mending creation*.
It comes from a beloved saint and sinner, Pastor Daniel Erlander, who died just this fall.
It reminds us that this isn't our project,
but rather God's vision of healing, Jesus' way justice, the Spirit's grace that sustains.
And we enter in, humbly, faithfully, boldly doing our part in the mending of creation.

For the mending of creation,

for our identity as Christ's own,
for the grace of repentance,
Let us pray: Stir up in us, O God, the gift of your Holy Spirit:
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord,
the spirit of joy in your presence, both now and forever. Amen.