

Divergence on the Lectionary - The Second Sunday of Advent, Year A

First Reading

Isaiah 11:1–10

There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit.
And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him,
the Spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the Spirit of counsel and might,
the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.
And his delight shall be in the fear of the LORD.
He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
or decide disputes by what his ears hear,
but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;
and he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.
Righteousness shall be the belt of his waist,
and faithfulness the belt of his loins.

The wolf shall dwell with the lamb,
and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat,
and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf 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 cobra,
and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den.
They shall not hurt or destroy
in all my holy mountain;
for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD
as the waters cover the sea.

In that day the root of Jesse, who shall stand as a signal for the peoples—of him shall the nations inquire, and his resting place shall be glorious. (ESV)

Second Reading

Romans 15:4–13

For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.

For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God's truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written,

“Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles,
and sing to your name.

And again it is said,

“Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people.”

And again,

“Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles,
and let all the peoples extol him.”

And again Isaiah says,

“The root of Jesse will come,
even he who arises to rule the Gentiles;
in him will the Gentiles hope.”

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope. (ESV)

Gospel Text

Matthew 3:1–12

In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said,

“The voice of one crying in the wilderness:
‘Prepare the way of the Lord;
make his paths straight.’”

Now John wore a garment of camel’s hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father,’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

“I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. 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 gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading

In a day as full of tumult as our own, Isaiah’s vision of the rule of the Branch that comes from the root of Jesse is one that echoes the cries of my own heart. How we long for such a day, when natural enemies lie down together. And yet that’s not quite it, not really the vision. It isn’t of an end to hostilities (although we might reasonably think that this would follow) but rather an end of the weak falling prey to the strong. This ties the latter half of our reading more closely to the first half, where it is said of the One who is to come, “but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth.”

As I pondered this lesson for Second Advent, I was struck, not by the rod of God’s mouth, (well, maybe that a little, too) but by the realization that in the Kingdom that will

be inaugurated by the One that Isaiah foresaw there will still be predators and prey. There remain the strong and the weak. The Kingdom doesn't eradicate these differences, only changes the way they behave. And what brings that change in behavior is the "knowledge of the Lord" that covers the earth as the waters cover the sea.

And so I shift from that vision of a future kingdom in which no one shall "hurt or destroy on all His holy mountain," to the reality that this kingdom already exists. I look around me and I ask, "How can that possibly be? I see hurting and destroying all over the place!" and yet I am told that it was the coming of the One of Isaiah's vision that brings that reality into being. I am tempted in this moment to fall back on the old saw of "already, not yet," but that is too easy. While there may yet be remnants of the kingdom of death at work around me, I feel this irresistible pull to step into a place where I can see that Kingdom at work.. To tear through the veil that pain and sorrow and suffering have laid over my eyes and see the Kingdom in all its glory standing right in front of me. And when I relent and take that step, everything changes. I am able to see into the present moment from a future that is already fulfilled, and I don't sigh for something that is not yet, but I sing for something that is.

And then I look around at the violence and the hatred that crashes around me and I see it for what it is, the last throes of the kingdom of death. And encouraged by that reality, I step back into the fray not as one who strives for victory, but as one who ministers from victory. My back is straighter, my voice calmer and more beautiful, my arm stronger to hold up the weak and to hold off the wicked. And I sing all the while.

Before I go, I'd like to share a couple of tidbits I picked up as I studied this passage in preparation for writing. In particular about a couple of phrases that bothered me when I first read them, those being:

and he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.

First, the "rod of his mouth." The basic form of the word in Hebrew translated "rod" is "*sebet*." This word is translated a couple of other ways in the Hebrew Scriptures, as "scepter" and "tribe." Yes. Tribe. I don't have any certainty about this, but when I think on it, I wonder. A rod would be made from the branch of a tree. And a tribe would be a branch of the family tree of Abraham. Is that the link?

It also made me realize that a scepter is the symbol of the king's authority to render discipline. Because that's what the rod is elsewhere in the Hebrew Scriptures. A tool for discipline. And so the One that Isaiah foresees will bring discipline to the earth.

And here's the kicker. When we go to that second phrase about killing the wicked with the breath of his lips? When you and I read that, we probably (I know I do and others as well) read "wicked" as a plural noun. The "wicked ones." But it's not, it's singular. Now, we could read that to mean "each wicked one" but that doesn't square very well with the One who will say through Ezekiel, "I desire not the death of a sinner, but rather that he turn from his wickedness and live." So I choose to see this "wicked one" (a better translation of *sebet* here than the ambiguous "the wicked" as *the* wicked one. Take that for what it's worth. It may not be a lot.

Finally, one last thing. In Matthew 2:23 (we'll get there soon) Matthew says that it will be said of the Messiah, "He shall be called a Nazarene." No such prophecy is recorded anywhere in Scripture, or even any non-canonical text. So where did he get that? It is suggested by some scholars that it comes from today's text in Isaiah. The word for branch that shall come forth from the roots of Jesse is "*neser*" in Hebrew. You might be able to see the jump from *neser* to Nazarene. It is as close as we'll probably ever come to an explanation of that mysterious prophecy.

Okay, on to the

Second Reading

It seems clear that our reading from Romans today was chosen because of its reference to the "root of Jesse" and the ties that has with our Isaiah text. But you can't have a lectionary reading with just one verse in it, so they added more before it. I just wish they'd gone back a few more verses. Just four. The beginning of our text from Romans still lacks context, and without that context, might be interpreted a lot of ways that Paul never intended.

So here are the verses I wish they'd included:

We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, "The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me." (Romans 15:1–3, ESV)

After which we begin:

For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you

may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.
Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.

Only then does Paul go on to show us just what that is, what was written in former times, and we get our reference to the root of Jesse. But all of those Scripture citations give hope to one specific group. The Gentiles. And he chose those texts because he is writing to encourage the Gentiles to “bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves.” This purpose, to teach the “Gentiles” in Rome to be forbearant of the “weak” is the driving force behind the entire letter to Rome. It is expressed in a variety of ways and some of the rhetorical devices used are foreign to modern readers, but that’s what Paul is up to throughout. Many teachers have spoken of Romans as Paul’s “systematic theology” because it covers so many of the points we find in his theology elsewhere, but to read it without reference to its purpose makes it into something it was never intended to be.

And here’s the really neat thing. If we read this passage with the addition of verses 1-3, we get an echo of Isaiah. Paul is encouraging the strong to care for the weak. To manifest the Kingdom already inaugurated by Jesus.

The identity of the “weak” in Romans is a subject of a lot of scholarly comment, but I disagree with most of it. I won’t get into that here because I don’t think it adds anything to our study for this week, but the book that completely changed my thinking on Romans was “[The Mystery of Romans](#)” by Mark Nanos. I recommend it highly, especially if you are suffering from insomnia. It’s brilliant, but incredibly dense writing. Some pages have three times as much footnote as text. (It was his doctoral dissertation, re-edited for publication.)

Okay, and now,

The Gospel Text

And we encounter John the Baptizer. I prefer that way of translating the participle that’s become part of his name. In order to draw all that we can from Matthew’s portrayal of John, it’s important that we set Matthew in his own context. I won’t do that exhaustively here. We’ll talk more about Matthew and his setting and concerns as we walk through Year A together, but some basics need to be said.

For many of you it’s old news that Matthew is a Jewish Christian writing for a group of believers who probably lived in the region we now call Syria, to a largely, if not exclusively Jewish-Christian community. I look forward to explaining some of the “why” behind his writing of the Gospel known as Matthew, but not today. Today it’s enough

that we remember that Matthew was Jewish and so were his hearers. (It's also good to remember that these texts were written more to be heard than to be read, as most people in that day and age couldn't read much, if at all.)

Given that, it's not quite so surprising that Matthew includes in his stories about John the encounter between him and the Pharisees. I think it's not unreasonable to think that Matthew (not the tax collector, the author of the Gospel) might have been a Pharisee, given his level of education and knowledge of the Scriptures, but most scholars will only go so far as to make him out to be a "scribe." I think that John's vituperation against the Pharisees speaks in support of his having been one of them, though. It rings of the anger of one who has been cast out. It doesn't matter too much, though, as any post Jamnia Jewish follower of Jesus would have experienced much of the same sense of being cast out. (The Council of Jamnia being the Jewish council at which Jewish authorities basically made it "unJewish" to be a follower of Jesus.)

John's reference to having Abraham as father is, of course, peculiarly Jewish, but when John goes on to say that God can raise up children to Abraham from even the stones around him, I hear Paul, whose work would precede the writing of Matthew by decades, and who argued, "That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring—not only to the adherent of the law but also to the one who shares the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all..." (Galatians 3:14, ESV) Paul might have been very unpopular with some parts of Matthew's community, and so the language is different, but right here at the beginning of the Gospel I think we have a first reference to the mission to the Gentiles.

Then John goes on to talk about the axe laid to the root of the trees. I think it's awfully important here to remember that in the Scriptures and traditions of Matthew's Judaism trees aren't used as metaphors for people, they're used as metaphors for structures, group identities, but not individuals. There is no threat here that the axe is awaiting the Pharisees, but a warning that Phariseeism is in jeopardy unless it bears good fruit. I'll get to the fire in just a bit.

Because then John describes the differences between himself and the One who will follow after him. He baptizes with water, for repentance, and the Messiah will baptize with Holy Spirit and fire. John will cleanse away sin in preparation for the Coming One, but He will cleanse away the "chaff."

I won't go into the two baptisms here, I'm accused of heresy enough already, but do take note that there are clearly two!

But I'd like to point to the way that the parallel structure of the two halves (fruitless trees - axe/fire and chaff/threshing floor/fire) means a parallel interpretation of the chaff. That is to say, this fire is NOT for persons, but for structures, group identities that are no longer fruitful. There is no threat of hellfire for God's children here.

I would also like to pass along some wisdom that I received from my spiritual director a long time ago. The chaff wasn't always useless. It made the fruit possible. It held it above the ground long enough for the grain to ripen. That insight works as well for us as individuals as it does for structures. There are identities we carry around now that do more harm to us than good, and they may need to go on the fire. But it is wise to remember that they served us for a time, and we can give thanks for that, even as we lay the shafts on the flame.

That's enough for this week!