

Stretching Toward Sunday

Thoughts, readings and reflections based on this week's lectionary readings

December 8, 2013
Second Sunday of Advent

The readings this week:

◦ *Isaiah 11:1-10* ◦ *Psalms 71:1-7, 18-19* ◦
Romans 15:4-13 ◦ *Matthew 3:1-12*

[Click here to read this week's Scriptures](#)

A Road Runs Through It

on Matthew 3:1-12

Driving home from the Thanksgiving holiday, this gospel passage on my mind, I spent most of my time thinking about roads. I thought of roads I have traveled, the ones already laid down for me: pathways made of concrete, of asphalt, of dirt, of stone. Pathways made of traditions, of the habits of communities, of the patterns of institutions. I thought of roads I have made where, as a minister-artist-writer, there were none: ways I have made through imagination, through dreaming, through effort and intention. Roads made of words, paint, paper; roads fashioned of longing and of prayer.

I thought of what it takes to make a way, how it is that we create a passage from one place to another within the landscape of the world or of our own inner terrain. How we must discern the materials to use, and the tools; how crucial to learn to navigate, to reckon, to read the lay of the land. How we sometimes find a path as much by stumbling as by skill. How we may have to tear up a road, make it again in a different direction.

But I think the Advent road is perhaps not like this. That it is not one that we can fashion from our striving and our skill. That when John the Baptist comes over that wilderness horizon, smelling of camel's hair, his lips dripping with honey and with fire, he is pointing toward a way that we can make only by what we give up, what we shed, what we let go of.

Looking and sounding so like the prophets who preceded him, John the Baptist is a man drenched in the desert. Although we know little about his life prior to now, the gospel writers viewed him as the one of whom Isaiah wrote, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'" John has been schooling himself in divestment, shedding himself of everything that would obstruct the path he has been called to prepare...

John's fiery words, especially those he addresses to the Pharisees and Sadducees, can overwhelm with their sheer force and disturbing forthrightness. Yet there is something that we—that I—need to hear within the fierceness of

John's message. It is difficult to make a way for the one who comes if I am not turned in the right direction. It is hard to perceive the kingdom of heaven if there are obstructions in my path—if I have not, to borrow one of John's images, sorted out the chaff, to make a space for the one who will enter to do his own clearing away.

Although the Advent path leads us through the desert, deprivation is neither the focus nor the final word of the wilderness. As the honey-eating John knew, the desert offers its own delights. What the wilderness gives us is a path that helps us perceive where our true treasure lies. And does not merely give us a path: empties us enough so that a path is made within us. Through us. Of us. A road for the holy to enter the world. A way for the Christ who comes.

What's in your way these days? If you were to imagine your life as a path, a road, what would it look like right now? Is there anything cluttering your way? Is there something you need to let go of in order to prepare the way for the Christ who enters the world in this and every season?

Blessings to you in these Advent days. May you find delights even in the desert spaces of this season.

Read the entire article by Jan Richardson at the [The Advent Door](#)

*Hope and
steadfastness go
together, and God is
the source of
both...This is the gospel
in a nutshell. Christ
has welcomed us, all of
us, and brought us
home to God and to
each other.*

On Romans 15:4-13, From
workingpreacher.org



Reflecting on the Word



___ 1st Reading: [Isaiah 11:1-10](#)

Is Isaiah's peaceable kingdom a realistic hope? If it is a hope for a new creation, what might that mean for the present creation? What is Isaiah saying to a "restless" world? Restlessness has become so pervasive that we take it to be normative. What does that say about the ability to create any kind of a peaceable kingdom?

[Suquamish United Church of Christ](#)

___ Psalm Reading: [Psalm 71:1-7, 18-19](#)

The psalmist had served God all his life and now, in old age, was beset with problems. Didn't he deserve better treatment? Why wasn't he bitter? In what ways have we Americans developed a worldly view of retirement? How can we develop genuine praise when we face overwhelming problems? Is praise a feeling or an act of obedience? [Bible.org](#)



[Peaceable Kingdom](#). Hicks, Edward, 1780-1849

Praying Toward Sunday

Laboring God,
with axe and winnowing fork
you clear a holy space
where hurt and destruction have no place,
and a little child holds sway.
Clear our lives of hatred and despair,
sow seeds of joy and peace,
that shoots of hope may spring forth
and we may live in harmony
with one another.

Amen.

*From the Revised Common Lectionary,
a service of the [Vanderbilt Divinity Library](#)*

Peaceable Kingdom

Isaiah's peaceable kingdom. Just painting that picture for people might be enough. "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." Everybody lives, and no one needs to devour anyone else in order to do it. That is the dream.

I think that was the dream Jesus lived. He did not come breathing fire, even though both the OT and Gospel readings this week might lead us to expect that. Isaiah says about the one raised up from the stump of Jesse, "He shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked," and John the Baptist concurs: "The chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." But never in his ministry does Jesus burn anything....

The one who actually comes as the clearest fulfillment of Isaiah's word decides that the only way to get to the peaceable kingdom is to live out its meekness here and now, no matter what. He does not breathe fire on anyone. He does not lay waste. He seeks out sinners; he touches and heals sick people; he eats with both Pharisees and tax collectors. He is himself a lamb lying down in the midst of wolves...

Would the fire have been better than the towel and the basin, better than the bread and the cup? With his life and death, Jesus gave us a window on the peaceable kingdom. As he lived it, that kingdom was not a place without conflict or even a place without large animals having sharp teeth and evil intent. Even so, he lived the peace Isaiah dreamed of, and after those large animals had done their best to devour him, God said, "No. Everybody lives, and no one has to devour anyone else in order to do it."

From [Pilgrim Preaching](#)

___ 3rd Reading: [Romans 15:4-13](#)

If we follow Christ's example in this and other areas of our lives, why will we need endurance, encouragement and hope? In verses 9-12 Paul quotes from four different Old Testament passages. What words and phrases express the dominant mood of these verses? Why is this mood appropriate for all who hope in Jesus? [InterVarsity Press](#)

___ 4th Reading: [Matthew 3:1-12](#)

What message did John preach? How did the people respond? How does Isaiah describe John's ministry (3:3)? Why do you think John responded to the Pharisees and Sadducees the way he that he did (vs. 7-10)? What warning does John give in verse 3:10? What characteristics does John use to describe the one coming after him? Why are these characteristics significant? [Clear Lake Bible Church](#)