

The Second Sunday of Advent • December 4, 2010

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

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Isaiah 11:1-10

"In That Day"

Thanks to last month's elections, we have a number of new senators and representatives downtown. Depending on your line of work, especially in our area, you might already have been affected by this time of transition. It seems like many of these new officials have been elected into office on the promise of making changes that will benefit their constituencies – and, indeed, our nation as a whole. Voters put their hope in the promise that it doesn't have to be "business as usual," that "Washington" (as much of the rest of our country seems to call it) can be changed. But was this past November really anything new? There've been big shifts in political power before, though it has been some time since a shift has been as newsworthy. There might be more of a hubbub these days with the "Tea Party," political celebrities, and real-time reporting, but officials have been voted in and out of office since the earliest days of our democracy. And the promise of change isn't a novel innovation: you might recall it from the most recent presidential election. People seem to agree that our elected leaders *could* be doing a better job of leading, or serving the citizens to whom they are responsible. Yet, time and again, these leaders rarely fulfill the hope of the people.

We need hope. There are a lot of issues that need to be addressed by our elected officials in Washington and by people all around our country. Unemployment continues to be a factor, both for the economy at large and for those who are in need of work. The federal government is freezing pay, and even our congregation has had to cut back our planned expenses for the year ahead. On the international stage, the tension in Asia has ramped up between North and South Korea. A flood of sensitive documents has been released by WikiLeaks, causing embarrassment among governments. Leaders of other nations openly call for hate and destruction directed at their enemies. This is what's going on around us. This is reality. This is the present time. But the present time is also Advent.

Advent is a season of hope. This is why we prepare our sanctuary and church building with such festive decorations and lights – with even more to come the closer we get to Christmas. In this Advent season, we're focusing on God's word through the prophet Isaiah, someone whose message went out to people who would be needing hope. Through Isaiah, God was telling His chosen people that foreign powers would overtake them, because the people had stopped living as His people. But God didn't just leave it at that, saying that He'd cut the people down like an axe felling a forest. Isaiah points the people to God's promise of hope: the people would be restored through One who was to come, a leader unlike one that the people had previously known. Isaiah points so much to God's Chosen One, Messiah, that his book is sometimes referred to as "the fifth Gospel." Today, you heard a passage from Isaiah 11, one that contains a few familiar phrases. If you take a look around our sanctuary, you'll see at least two of our Advent banners that recall Isaiah's reference to the branch of Jesse. That branch, the Messiah, would be the hope of God's people, the hope that they would need in the dark years ahead. What's more, that branch is the hope that you and I need today. As we look together at this passage to see what that's the case, **why the Messiah is a leader unlike any other**, think about these three things: **qualification, performance, and results.**

God says that a shoot will go out from the stump of Jesse. Not from David, the king, but from David's source. God will raise up this leader for the people from an unexpected and humble beginning, and this shoot – this branch – will be greater than anything that had come before. Looking at these first few verses in Isaiah 11, we can see why: God Himself would prepare this leader, endowing him with everything needed to rule the people. He would be more than human,

divinely prepared to do what a king ought to do. The promised branch will be able to discern the truth, to perceive reality, because God is at work in him. But even more importantly, this ruler's focus is on God. His goal in life is to respect and honor the Lord, not to bring glory or gain to himself. He knows the Lord through personal experience and, unlike the kings who have gone before him, this king always seeks to serve Him. This promised one has been prepared by God, and his mind and heart are in the right place. **He is qualified.**

While qualifications are good, they don't mean much unless they are put to use. Continuing on, the next few verses of today's Old Testament reading show us how the promised Messiah will carry out his rule. Will this king be like the other descendants of David that the people have known? We hear that the branch of Jesse will judge the people – not according to appearances, but based on the reality beneath the surface. You and I live in a culture that very much judges by appearance, but this leader won't be misled by those things: he knows what's really going on. He cannot be deceived, won't be tricked, isn't fooled by anything. Now before you're alarmed by that, know that this leader watches over the powerless. Unlike our elected leaders, who need political support from the wealthy and well-connected to retain power, the Messiah can show special concern for poor and downcast people without having to placate the powerful. His decisions aren't based in fear of political fallout. This ruler can do what needs to be done for his people. The truth is on his side, and the wicked will fall against its power. Righteousness and faithfulness will be his belt, essential attributes which become a foundation to everything he does. He is righteous: he will always do the right thing, he will always act justly. He is faithful: his people can depend on him. This king is a true servant of his people. Does this sound much like what we know as government? **In his performance, we see in the branch of Jesse a radically different kind of king.**

And what happens when this Messiah comes? What will the rule of this king look like? In verses 6-9, we hear that this shoot from the stump of Jesse will be the Prince of Peace. With his rule comes security and safety that represents a transformation of the world as we know it. The seemingly strong will depend on those who appeared weak. The wild animals will look to the child for leadership, the one the world would least expect to be able to provide it. Fear and insecurity will be no more. The evil that threatens will be removed from every corner of creation. **The results of the Messiah's rule** are the fulfillment of what the world needs, even what we need today.

The final verse of today's passage from Isaiah points us to the root – the descendent – of Jesse as a sign and signal for the nations, a banner that will announce the arrival of God's chosen one to all the world. Jesus is that root of Jesse, and his cross is the banner of hope for the nations. The cross is a sign that God has fulfilled His promise to give His people the ultimate servant-leader. Under Jesus' cross, all people might find the rest that we so desperately need in this world.

Jesus is the fulfillment of God's word through Isaiah; you can take hope in him as your leader. More so than any other human being, Jesus is **qualified** as the perfect leader: he has experienced God's presence because he *is* God, and his focus has always been on living out the Father's will. Jesus **performs** as the perfect leader, acting in righteousness and faithfulness for a poor and powerless world, even though it costs him his life on the cross. And Jesus delivers **results** that only the perfect leader could: His death and resurrection won victory over sin, defeating evil and fear and giving the gift of security and safety to all who trust in him. His rule of love will transform the world, even as it has begun to transform the hearts and minds of his people, the Church.

For those of us who have been called to faith in Jesus as God's Son, the Messiah, Advent is a season of hope. Advent isn't just a looking-ahead to the celebration of Christmas: we're looking ahead to the experience of Jesus as ruler **in that day that he comes again.**

In that day, we will have the fulfillment of our hope.

Amen.