

Sermon – Matthew 3:1-12; Isaiah 11:1-10
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Grace Lutheran Church
2 Advent – Year A
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“Repent! Rejoice!”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. This time of year is marked with a return to traditions that we have kept in years past. We bake cookies using the recipes handed down through the generations. We pull out the same decorations and ornaments, letting each one spark memories of the past. We travel to see the same loved ones, attend the same parties, listen to the same music. No year is the same as the one before, but this season, perhaps more than any other, has a joyfully repetitive air to it. Traditions do evolve, of course. For many, the acquisition of the family Christmas tree is a centerpiece of this month’s celebrations. As a child, my parents would load us into the station wagon and drive out into the Wisconsin wilderness to the same tree farm so that we could spend hours – hours! – looking for the Lyle family Christmas tree. We’ve done that a few times with our kids, but more often than not have found ourselves at one or another Christmas tree lot, spending what our children would likely describe as hours – hours! – looking for the perfect tree. From farm or lot, the five of us would return home with a tree, stand it up, and get to trimming. Things were a bit different this year. With time slipping away (it is already December after all) the decision was made to send me out on my own. To Home Depot. On a Friday morning. After mere minutes, I’d thrown two trees onto an orange cart, tied them to the top of my car, and headed for home. Not exactly the stuff of a classic Christmas movie. Once home, I gave each tree a fresh cut, and then discovered how comically difficult it is to get a tree into a

- stand by oneself. After getting each one secured at an angle that would disappoint even the people of Pisa, I gave up. I had saved a bit of time, but until my family came home to help, I would have nothing but crooked trees on my hands.
2. Which is sort of where John the Baptist finds himself, out there in the wilderness of Judea. The people have been coming out to be baptized for repentance, and John hasn't turned them away. He knows these sinners need it. He can see their crooked trunks and the withering branches that have failed to produce good fruit. And he knows tradition won't save them, Abraham's descendants or not. The Lord is coming, says John, and time appears to be short. He will baptize with fire, burning out the chaff. The ax, John says, is lying at the root of the tree, and the fruitless trees seem to have little hope. They will be chopped down and thrown into the fire, leaving behind nothing but stumps.
 3. But is the stump the end of the story? Is there life and hope to be found? Can anything good come from a stump? In his 2018 novel *The Overstory*, Richard Powers writes about the power and strength found in the world of trees: "For there is hope of a tree, if it goes down, that it will sprout again, and that its tender branches will not cease. Though the root grows old in the earth, and the stock dies in the ground, at the scent of water it will bud, and bring forth boughs." Which is to say that, where we see only something cut off and abandoned, God sees possibility. God does some of God's best work with stumps.
 4. Seven hundred years before the birth of Jesus, God's people languished in despair. The northern Kingdom of Israel was collapsing, and the southern Kingdom, where David's line still held the throne, was not faring much better. Through political mismanagement, economic oppression, and rank idolatry, the people were pushed to the brink. David's line held the throne but had

long since become part of the problem. The line had stopped bearing worthy fruit. But out of that stump, God promises to bring forth a new shoot of life, a branch growing up, seeking the sun, fueled by the old roots. In Isaiah's immediate context, this promise is fulfilled as God raises up a new king, Hezekiah, who brings reform and righteousness back to the people for a time. But Isaiah's words speak to a longer-term hope, too, one that no human ruler, however righteous, could hope to achieve.

5. Isaiah paints a picture of the Peaceable Kingdom, a new world led by a child in which all children of God shall live in peace. Not through enforced security, but because there will no longer be anything to fear. The lamb will not be afraid of the big, bad wolf; neither will a child have cause to fear snakes. What a vision. Who could yearn for more than a world in which we can trust that when our children and grandchildren, our nieces, nephews, and neighbors go outside that they will return safely home? What better than a world in which a child's fate is not predetermined by where they are born or the color of their skin? In which children are not abused or neglected, in which they need not become refugees because there is no longer war or famine from which to flee? How do we get to such a world? A little child, the coming Christ, shall lead us there.
6. We are not there yet, of course. But Christ has come, and Christ comes to us again this day. With ax in hand, even. But just as one gives a Christmas tree a fresh cut before putting it in the stand, Jesus stands before us to cut off that growth that is not producing fruit. This time of Advent is perhaps less about us getting ready to welcome Jesus, and more about God preparing us to be ready to meet Jesus. What needs to be trimmed from your life? A commitment to being overcommitted? A desire for seasonal celebrations to be perfect rather than meaningful? An idolatry that displaces Christ from the center of your life? Whatever it is for you, it is a question to ponder during this season as we focus on this Christ who has come, who will come again,

and who comes to us every day in between. Repent! Turn back to the God who comes to you in grace.

7. We make straight the royal highway by cultivating peace in our hearts and, seeking to enact the Peaceable Kingdom whenever and however we can. We know that all our efforts will never be more than a hopeful shadow of what is to come, but nevertheless we light candles against the darkness. The theologian N. T. Wright writes of this life lived in-between: “Every act of love, every deed done in Christ and by the Spirit, every work of true creativity—doing justice, making peace, healing families, resisting temptation, seeking and winning true freedom—is an earthly event in a long history of things that *implement* Jesus’s own resurrection and *anticipate* the final new creation and act as signposts of hope, pointing back to the first and on to the second.” As with resurrection, so for incarnation. We prepare the way of the Kingdom by allowing ourselves to be signposts on the roadside, pointing always to Jesus.

8. John speaks a strong word to us this morning. The Messiah is coming, ax in one hand and winnowing fork in the other. But what could be better this Advent than a fresh cut? Cut off from your old roots that have kept you bound in tangled systems of suffering, sin, and death, you are replanted, able now to drink deeply from the waters of baptism by which you are joined to the unending life of the Holy Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, just as Dean is so joined to God this day. Planted anew in the ever-flowing streams of God’s mercy and grace, we grow straight and bear fruit, even as we await the coming of Christ again. And he will come. For out of the stump of crucifixion grows the new life of the resurrection. Rejoice! Nothing can cut us off from the love or life of Christ again. Come, Lord Jesus. Amen.

And now may that peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.