

Sermon – Matthew 3:1-12
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Grace Lutheran Church
2 Advent – Year A
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“The Ax Is at the Root”

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. It is not yet the Christmas season, of course, but it is the Christmas-movie season. I don't personally go in for Hallmark movies, although I won't judge you if you do; in the Lyle household we rely on a standard rotation of favorites, the crown jewel of which is *National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation*. A slapstick masterpiece with heart, the film kicks off with a sequence to which many of us can relate, as the Griswold family heads out into the country to cut down the family Christmas tree. Of course, everything goes wrong, from an encounter with highway hooligans to Clark realizing he didn't bring a saw. But the tree is procured – dug out of the ground, in fact – as the family careens toward a fun old-fashioned family Christmas. We've already watched it once this year, and I'm sure we will again. Watching a movie that is, at its core, about nostalgia, about trying to bring the past into the present, is itself an act of nostalgia. After all, I still remember walking three blocks from our home on McArthur St. to the movie theater to see it for the first time in 1989. Each viewing adds another layer. Christmas movies and Christmas trees often draw us back into the past, with warm memories of what seemed, perhaps, to be a simpler, better time.
2. There's nothing wrong with treasured memories, of course, so long as our rose-colored view of the past does not prevent us from being clear-eyed about our present. Not that John the Baptist would let us. Into our Christmas

nostalgia comes this fiery prophet of Advent. His words of warning to the religious leaders and the crowds in the wilderness are words for us, too, and he has not forgotten his ax. Its blade is at our roots, for the trees of our lives have not consistently borne the fruit God desires. God desires peace, but war rages on. God desires abundance for all, but we hoard resources and create scarcity. God desires love, but powerful wolves devour the lambs. Repent, John cries out, for Messiah is coming, winnowing fork in hand. Nostalgia won't save us. And any honest assessment of ourselves and our world makes clear that we are most certainly in need of saving. The image of a barren stump is not as romantic as a Christmas tree, but it is, perhaps, apt.

3. Not long ago, I was at an interfaith gathering welcoming the new presidents of the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago and Catholic Theological Union. I'm sure I'll have many opportunities to quote my Lutheran colleague in the future, because Dr. Shauna Hannon is amazing, but something Father Enzo Del Brocco said that day stuck with me, which went something like this: "Our God is the God of surprises. And when you realize this, you can begin to live with awe." John tells us that our fruitless trees are about to be cut down, but God's people might just know that's not the end of the story. Centuries earlier, Isaiah spoke of a new shoot of life coming forth from the stump of Jesse. David's lineage, seemingly gone to rot in the person of King Ahaz, finds fruitful growth in his successor, King Hezekiah. But Isaiah's words point to a greater future, too, when the true king will come. This One, the Christ, anointed with the promised Holy Spirit, will himself be cut down, of course. But the God of stumps is also the God of the cross, and new life can grow from both. Repent, John cries out. Turn around! And what a surprise to find that when we turn around, we see that Jesus was there, for you, the whole time.
4. The Christ incarnate at Bethlehem is the crucified and risen Jesus, and he continues to be up to surprising work in our world. While the vision of the Peaceable Kingdom foretold by Isaiah seems no closer now than it did 2,800

years ago, it will one day come, and we are called to work for it here now, on earth as it is in heaven. Not only shall wolves lie down with lambs and little children play with snakes, but we will be called into God's presence on the holy mountain upon which neither hurt nor harm shall come to us anymore. And who will be there? All peoples. All nations. In Isaiah's vision there are no people who are garbage. The God of life will welcome Somalis and Venezuelans and Russians and Ukrainians and even Americans. And in worship and praise of this God of Life, we work for the well-being of all people. In this season of Advent, we prepare the Lord's way not with tinsel and lights but with kindness and love. Not that some tinsel and lights for good measure can hurt!

5. This morning, in just a bit, little Tess will be brought by her parents and godparents to God's font of grace to be baptized into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Tess has not yet failed to produce good fruit; she is only a baby, for goodness' sake. Still, how better to prepare Tess for her life, in whatever surprising, wonderful shape it will take, then to have God lay claim of her through Word, water, and Spirit? And while we know it will happen, it's still a surprise. Watch! Listen! The Holy Spirit, the same Spirit that tore through the heavens and alit upon Jesus will descend upon Tess, with wisdom and understanding, counsel and might, knowledge and the fear of the Lord. And while we do not know what Tess's life will bring, we know that she is forever known, claimed, and loved by God. Her new life in Christ reminds us of all that is good and invites us again into awe.
6. Friends, as you prepare for Christmas, by all means cherish your memories. But be honest, about both the past and the present. There is not some ideal golden age to which we can return. We have too much work to do in the present to pretend otherwise. Repent. Turn around. You, like Tess, have been baptized for the future that God is unfolding even now. Discover the God of life and love at work in the world and join in. The God of surprises is not

done yet. Not by a long shot. It is true that this world will not know peace in its fullness until we enter the fullness of God's reign. But that doesn't mean we give up, and it doesn't mean God isn't working. Long before Christ first came, that child Hezekiah was born. And he brought peace, real peace, for a time. It didn't last, but it was better than the war and violence that came before and after. May we, too, commit to peace, real peace, among all peoples. May we work for it and pray for it. May it come, by God's grace. How better to prepare for the Prince of Peace, this same Jesus who is also already here. The old has been cut down and new growth springs forth. Amen.

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