Sunday, December 8, 2019Westminster Presbyterian Church

“The Gift of Do-Overs” Rev. Caroline Vinson Dennis, pastor

Isaiah 11:1-10

Matthew 3:1-12

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,

And a branch shall grow out of his roots.

The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him,

The spirit of wisdom and understanding,

The spirit of counsel and might,

The spirit of knowledge and fear of the Lord.

His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.

He shall not judge by what his eyes see,

Or decide by what his ears hear;

But with righteousness he shall judge the poor,

And decide with equity for the meek of the earth;

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 around his waist,

And faithfulness the belt around his loins.

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.

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 asp,

And the weaned child shall put his hand in the adder’s den.

They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain;

For the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord

As the waters over the sea.

*Today is the Second Sunday of Advent. Traditionally, it is the Sunday we hear from the prophets, calling us to make a straight path, for the coming of the Lord. In their words, there is correction and vision. Listen now, to the words of the one God sent, to prepare the way of the Lord, from the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 3, verses 1 – 12. Listen for God’s word for you.*

Matthew 3:1-12

In those days, John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming,

“Repent! For the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said,

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness;

‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.”

Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist,

and his food was locusts and wild honey.

Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them,

“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?

Bear fruit worthy of repentance.

Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’;

for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.

Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees;

every tree therefore that does not bear fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

I will baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me;

I am not worthy to carry his sandals.

He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor

and will gather his wheat into the granary;

but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

This is the word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

**Moms as Prophets**

For several reasons, today’s readings make me think of my mom. Mom’s make good prophets, don’t you think? Encouraging us to imagine what might be, if we would just clean up our rooms, be nicer to our siblings, practice our lessons more. Inviting us like, John the Baptist, to clean up our act. Sometimes even calling down the wrath of God upon us.

**More Light Reveals More Dirt**

My mother has a morning routine. After rising from bed, she brushes her hair, puts on her slippers and bathrobe and then walks through the house turning on lights. Finishing in the kitchen where she turns on the coffee allowing the aroma and the lights to rouse her family. My childhood home was always filled with light. One day, I returned home from playing at a friend’s house, and remarked to my mom, that my friend’s house was not as bright as ours. I confided in my mom that I suspected that my friend’s family kept the lights low to hide some of the dirt.

Even though we long for the growing light of the Advent wreath, we realize that the increased light reveals some of our dirt. We light a candle of peace only to see all that is not peace. Isaiah offers us a vision of a leader that will emerge from the cut off stump of Jesse, one from the Davidic line upon whom the spirit of the Lord would rest. We read Isaiah’s description of a leader who would possess wisdom and understanding, good counsel and strength of character, ushering in a kingdom where established enemies lay down together in peace in a week when we have listened in to our leaders tear one another down, over and over again. Isaiah tells of a time when a child can play fearlessly near the home of a venomous snake while we live in a time when our children spend their school time in active shooter drills.

We light this candle of peace and confess that we are not at peace, with the things that steal our time, with the things that make us afraid of our neighbors, with the things that numb our senses. We are not at peace with the things that keep us awake at night, the things that keep us from being the people that God created us to be, the things that snuff out the light of Christ within us.

**What’s Needed is a Good Pruning**

What’s needed, John says, is a good pruning. Cut out the dead wood, throw it into the fire, so that the new life has a place to grow. Make straight a way for the Lord.

My mom is a master gardener. She nurtures beauty, bountiful harvests of cutting flowers, tasty tomatoes and peaceful patios. Her particular expertise lies in pruning. It hurts her heart I think to see bushes cut into balls with electric sheers or the knotted limbs of crepe myrtles that have been subjected to a type of cutting she calls, “crepe murder.” These quick fixes she tells me make for uniform hedges, but result in a bush that is hollow inside. A bush that after a few years must be torn out and replaced.

When my mom prunes, it takes time. She studies each branch and decides where to make the cut so that the new growth will come out in the right place. The bushes she tends are full and lush, with life on the inside and beauty on the outside.

One year, I remember, we thought my mom had lost her senses. At the top of the driveway at my childhood home, there was a hedge of abelia, a happy haven for honeybees with its clusters of tiny white, bell-shaped blossoms. At the corners of our house were holly bushes, whose waxy leaves and red berries were harvested for holiday decorations (deck the halls with bows of holly…). Acuba circled the edges of the shade gardens in the back and boxwoods were like dotted lines connecting the hollies in the front.

One Saturday morning in late winter, while we went off to ride our bikes around the neighborhood or play Barbies at our neighbor’s house, my mom put on her garden gloves and picked up her pruning clippers and loppers. When we returned, we found all the beautiful bushes had been reduced to leafless stumps. We called our mom, Morticia, after the mom on a popular TV show of the time, The Addams Family, now made into a series of movies. Morticia Addams who was known to cut all the beautiful blossoms off of a bouquet of roses and arrange the remaining thorny stems in a vase for her table.

But, as the days grew longer and warmer, the new shoots began to emerge, until by mid-summer the bees were once again swarming around the little abelia flowers, holly leaves could be plucked for poking sisters, boxwoods bordered the front walk and acuba softened the edges of the patio with its variegated foliage. If well-tended, including a radical pruning every 5-10 years, those bushes could flourish for decades or even for generations.

An expert tender of grape vines, I have learned, must prune all the deadwood and 70 percent of the new growth from a vine, if it is to produce sweet and abundant fruit.

**Those Who Came for a Do Over**

Matthew’s Gospel tells us that many came out to be baptized at the river Jordan. People from all Judea and Jerusalem, country folk and city folk, heard and responded to John’s call to repent, to turn from all the things that were making them hollow inside. They came for a good pruning, to make way for that fresh shoot of life to emerge. It was a hard word John was preaching but they were ready for something to change and they realized the something that needed to change was them.

**Those Who Came for a Little Off the Top**

John saves his harshest words for the most religious of all. Many heeded the call, “repent, for the kingdom of God has come near,” but when the Pharisees and Sadducees come out, people who are known by the rigor of their religious practice and keeping of the most minute of laws, John calls them out, “you brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance!”

These, John suspected, had just come out for a little off the top, not for the deep pruning that would make way for the new growth that Jesus would bring. John knew that despite their religious practices, their hearts were not softened by the needs of their neighbors, choosing law over compassion. Elsewhere in Matthews gospel, these same religious folk criticized Jesus for healing on the Sabbath for instance. They had come for the ritual, but they would return from the river unchanged, following the rule of law, but not the rule of love.

And what about us, do we come here, week after week because it is the right thing to do? Going to church is what good people do? Or do we come here because we want to be changed? To have the dead wood of busyness, self-righteousness, greed, helplessness, trimmed away so that we might bear good fruit?

**Why We Come – For a Vision of What Might Be**

We come for a vision of what might be, to lament the ways we have not lived into that vision, and to ask God’s help to emerge from this place somehow changed, ready to show the world that we have not only been baptized with water, but with the fire of the Holy Spirit living in us, serving and loving through us. We come because each week, we know it is a chance to be born again to receive the good and needed gift of a do-over.

Repenting of our busyness we might lay down our to-do list to listen to a friend when they call. Repenting of our fear, we might strike up a conversation with a stranger. Repenting of our greed, we might ask for less and give more. Repenting of our self-righteousness, we might see the humanity of those who sit across the aisle from us and consider with respect the valid viewpoints of our debate partners. Repenting of our sense of helplessness, we might do one small act that can make a big difference.

If we don’t allow this time we spend each week at worship, or the time we spend each morning in devotion and prayer to change us. If we reject the good gift of a do-over that is offered to us, then all our religious practice is just window dressing, a trim off the top, that leaves us hollow and dead inside. But if we allow the vision to inspire us, and the Spirit to convict us, we can become made new, inside and out.

Jacob has been taking an on-line course this semester. On a few assignments he had not done as well as he had hoped. Toward the end of the semester, his instructor gave the class a gift, the chance to retake one of the weekly quizzes. He would have been foolish not to accept the gift. Instead of accepting the failure, he restudied the material, and tried again, doing much better the second time. The gift of the do-over not only gave him a better grade, but helped him to know the material better, which is the whole point of the class, is it not?

John’s invitation to a baptism of repentance is God’s gift to us, a chance to try again. And John’s foretelling of the baptism that Jesus brings, “a baptism with the Holy Spirit and with fire,” is God’s promise, that the vision of what might be will burn within us and the Holy Spirit will help us, to bear the fruits of our repentance, fruits of peace among enemies, love among neighbors, prosperity among the poor, and joy in all the world.

Do not leave here without this good gift, the gift of a good pruning, that Christ might grow in you, and you might bear good and abundant fruit worthy of the one who came so that we might have life, and hope, and peace. For we are not meant to be dead inside, but alive to all that can be, when he is alive in us.