Isaiah 11:1-6

1 A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.
2 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 the fear of the LORD.**3** His delight shall be in the awesome reverence of the LORD. He shall not judge by what his eyes see or decide by what his ears hear, **4** but with righteousness he shall judge for the poor and decide with equity for the oppressed 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.**5** Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist and faithfulness the belt around his loins.**6** The wolf shall live with the lamb; the leopard shall lie down with the kid; the calf and the lion will feed together, and a little child shall lead them.

Romans 15:7-12

7 Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. **8** For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the ancestors **9** and that the gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written, *"Therefore I will confess you among the gentiles and sing praises to your name"*; **10** and again he says, *"Rejoice, O gentiles, with his people"*; **11** and again, *"Praise the Lord, all you gentiles, and let all the peoples praise him"*; **12** and again Isaiah says, *"The root of Jesse shall come, the one who rises to rule; in him the gentiles shall hope."*

Matthew 3:1-4, 7-11

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, **2** "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." **3** 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.' *"*

7 When John saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for his baptism, he said to them, "*You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? **8** Therefore, bear fruit worthy of repentance, **9** and 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. **10** Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire."*

11 "I baptize you with water for repentance, but the one who is coming after me is more powerful than I, and I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire."

Proverbs 3:5-12

5 Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; **6** in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight. **7** Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD and shun evil. **8** This will bring health to your body and nourishment to your bones.
9 Honor the LORD with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops; **10** then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine.

11 My child, do not despise the LORD's discipline, and do not resent his rebuke, 12 because the LORD disciplines those he loves, as a father the son he delights in.

Isaiah 35:1-7a

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad; the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the
crocus **2** it shall blossom abundantly and rejoice with joy and shouting. The glory of Lebanon
shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the LORD, the
majesty of our God. **3** Strengthen the weak hands and make firm the feeble knees. **4** Say to those
who are of a fearful heart, *"Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with
vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you."*
5 Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be opened; **6** then
the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall
break forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert; **7** the burning sand shall become a pool
and the thirsty ground springs of water.

James 5:7-8

7 Be patient, therefore, brothers and sisters, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for
the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late
rains. **8** You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near.

Matthew 11:2-6

2 When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples **3** and
said to him, *"Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"* **4** Jesus answered
them, *"Go and tell John what you hear and see: **5** the blind receive their sight, the lame walk,
those with a skin disease are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have
good news brought to them. **6** And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."*

Sermon for Advent week 2 and 3: *And a Little Child Shall Lead Them…*

I have always wondered at the words of the prophet Isaiah, especially during Advent when we hear so much of it read. What really struck me from today's reading was not that *"the wolf shall live with the lamb;"* or that *"the leopard shall lie down with the kid,"* nor that *"the calf and the lion will feed together…"* What the Spirit brought out for me from that reading was that *"a little child shall lead them."*

Was this a prophecy that God would not anoint a *grown* man to do his work as the Messiah but that he would send his Son, someone who would be God's own and be about his Father's work from birth? Perhaps… But I believe Isaiah's words to point to more than the birth of the one who would save us from the evils of this world. I believe all these words from Isaiah were meant to show us that non-violence is possible – that doing God's will does not require violence – violence has just become <u>*humanity's*</u> *way*.

God's way *is harmony*, it is <u>working together</u> toward peace, both the strong and the weak, working side-by-side. The leader of such work need not be strong as we understand strength in our society. Rather, such a leader is one of innocence, which is what the "*little child*" in Isaiah symbolizes. Innocence is not the same as naivety. Christ is the supreme example of this – Jesus was not naïve. But he <u>was</u> innocent of the blood of humanity. Instead of shedding the blood of others, in his divine wisdom he chose to shed his own blood to accomplish the holy work the Father put before him. As followers of Christ, we feel the power and strength of his leadership

even today, nearly 2000 years after his earthly death. THAT is the power of innocence, the power of a little child. That is the strength and wisdom of our leader, Jesus Christ.

His is the way of peace, the direct path of innocence, not the winding road of bloodshed and enforced peace through violence – as it was in the time of Jesus' earthly life and still is in ours. Such divine peace is ours to be had in our own lives, even in times of upheaval and turmoil, when we prepare the way of the Lord, making his path to our hearts and minds straight.

"*Making the path of the Lord straight*" is to allow Christ to rule in our hearts. He is the root of Jesse. Jesus is the one we must allow to take root in our hearts and minds, and he will straighten the crooked paths that remain in our lives, if we let him. Living in Jesus, following his Way, we will bear fruit in our lives that shows all people that we have repented. No matter what we have done in life before this – no matter what evil still tries to hold onto our hearts – we can all grow in our Christlikeness and honor the Lord our God.

To live as the innocent children of God, to seek peace, we must confess God as the source of all good things. During difficult times, we must confess Jesus as our hope and praise him, even amidst turmoil. We have not been promised easy lives, but rather that God will take care of our needs according to his goodness and wisdom. When we choose to be baptized, or our parents bring us as infants or children to be baptized, we submit ourselves and our children to God. We commit to Christ's divine calling to follow him.

This Sacrament has been given to us as a sign of dedication of ourselves to God. Submerged in the water, we die to sin and decide to live for God, to make straight the way of the Lord to our hearts. We become part of his holy people, just like the people of Israel whom we know to be the people God prepared for the coming of his Messiah. If you have read the Old Testament, you know that the Israelites were shaped by God through many trials and temptations. God never abandoned them, no matter how difficult they made the paths to their hearts. But the more they raised up stumbling blocks and barriers to their hearts, the harder God had to work to clear the road. They went through fiery trials – not to punish them, but because they chose to make the way difficult by straying from the Lord.

John the Baptist spoke with understanding of the history of God's chosen people when he said that the one who was to come, God's Messiah, would baptize those who wished to follow him with the **Holy Spirit** and **with fire**. When we choose to follow God (and choose to raise our children to know God as their Father) he pours out his Holy Spirit upon us… to give us strength and *guidance to become his holy people*. Therefore, we are never alone – his Spirit is always with us. When life is good we praise the Lord. When the fires of life are upon us, we can still praise the Lord for his Spirit gives us strength and brings us through to the other side. The fiery trials of life shape us, burning away the dross, so that we are refined like metal.

We become tempered, like steel, throughout life after baptism. Steel hardens and becomes stronger through repeated times in the fire and being quenched in water. In much the same way, we are made stronger in our faith by the act of leaning upon our baptism during troubled times. When we learn to trust in God alone, to clear the way to our hearts, the Spirit shows us the way forward. Sometimes that way is through the fire, but we go through it in Christ, strengthened by the Spirit, and surrounded by the community of faithful believers within the

Church. United, we are made ready for whatever comes, for we can face it together. We face it as one Church, as one people before God. We face whatever comes, living together in Christ. We can encourage one another and say as Isaiah did: *"Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you."*

Remember that God has said *"vengeance is Mine."* We are to remain innocent… We become innocent when we are raised from the waters of baptism. We remain living in innocence if, when we sin, we confess to the Lord and live lives of repentance, living according to the teachings of God through the Word and the Spirit. The Messiah has saved us. And so with our eyes and ears opened, we can see peace in the midst of war, experience hope amidst chaos, and rejoice in the Lord, waiting patiently for the fires of life to be quenched, knowing that streams will break forth in the desert.

If you thirst for God, know that God has responded. The Messiah has come. He will come again. In this we find hope. Until then, as his body in this world, we work toward peace, trusting in God's goodness to bring peace once again to a weary and warring world. We join together, joyously singing God's praises as we wait. As Christians, we prepare to celebrate the birth of the Christ child, this innocent child born so long ago, because we know through the Spirit, with a knowledge that surpasses understanding, that somehow hope was born into the world once again that day. That hope is for everyone, not just for the people of Israel. We are one in Christ – brothers and sisters across the face of this world who await the day when Christ will come again in power, when all shall see their salvation and hold God in awe and reverence.

Until that day, let us rejoice. Let us stop trying to find someone to blame for our troubles, for the inhumane ways of this world, and embrace one another in Christ. Let us stand side-by-side, in Christ, bound together as one by the Holy Spirit, as we face the flames of life together. Let us live in hope, seek peace, and find joy, **united** behind and within Christ, who *entered the world* as an innocent child and leads us forward **in the strength of innocence**.

Holy One, baptize us in Spirit and fire. Make us yours and lead us now and in the life to come. We give you dominion over our hearts. Lead us in your innocence. To God the Father, Christ his Son, and to the Holy Spirit be all glory, honor, and power, forever and ever. Amen.