

Second Sunday of Advent
Year A - 4/12/2016

Isaiah 11:1-10
Psalm 72:1-7,18-21
Romans 15:4-14:13
Matthew 3:1-12

In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...

If I asked you to consider where in the Scriptures you might be most aware of the Trinity, the presence of God as Father, Son, and Spirit (or Creator, Redeemer, Life-giver), I suspect that most of you would point to the New Testament, perhaps the Gospels, specifically. And you would be right, of course. Clearly **Jesus** comes, proclaiming **God**, and living and teaching and working by the power of the **Spirit**. The Gospels are rich with this Trinitarian imagery and theology.

But I want to continue my focus this morning on our Hebrew Scriptures. After all, if we look simply at the *volume* of these writings, compared to the New Testament, you might be surprised to know that the Old Testament is almost four times as long as the New Testament. That's significant. And it makes me wonder whether we really pay enough attention to this huge volume of Scripture.

And contained within these writings is actually quite a bit of Trinitarian imagery. You see, as well as the Creative God, and the life-giving Spirit, the Hebrew Scriptures contain a figure (for want of a better word) known as *Wisdom*, whom we understand as standing as or referring to the person of the Son, even though the person of Christ is not specifically mentioned in the Hebrew Scriptures.¹

But Isaiah today, in his poetic oracle, certainly focuses on the action of the Spirit - as that power by which all that he prophesies from God might come to pass. The vision Isaiah sketches here is not intended to be a utopian dream about God's ultimate future.

¹ Interestingly, however, David perhaps foresaw the person of Christ, mentioned at least in Psalm 80:17 - "Let your power rest on the man at your right hand: on that son of man whom you made so strong for yourself"

This is specifically a promise about a king to reign among God's people now and the quality of life that would come from such a reign. The "stump" referred to by Isaiah is the "stump of Jesse" (Isa.11:1). Allusion to Jesse, father of David, refers us to the line of David's family, believed to be the carrier of God's goodness and God's faithfulness in the world.

However this line is seemingly in ruin, and the very future of Israel is in doubt. This "stump" bespeaks a situation of despair and resignation. Then, however, enters God's "spirit" (v. 2). The poet refers to God's life-giving, future-creating, world-forming, despair-ending power and wind, which can create an utter newness. This "wind of God" is irresistible, beyond human control, management, or predictability. The poem announces that the wind has come to blow over the stump. The wind indicates new possibility; the possibility that something may indeed grow from the stump, and bring Israel back to life, as it were.

The authorizing of the new king by God's powerful spirit will make the king an advocate of good, fair, and equitable judgment. The wind that will blow over the new governance is marked by wisdom, understanding, and power.

The primary responsibilities of the king in the ancient world included dispensation of justice, that is, making decisions about social power and social goods. The poet (and the Bible generally), however, has a quite distinctive notion of righteousness and equity. This equity is a partisan, interventionist, active justice, which is entrusted to the "shoot." The new king, will be the kind of judge who will attend to the needs of the "meek" and the "poor," that is, the socially powerless.

These acts of righteousness and equity are not only occasional acts or arbitrary interventions, but they are enduring characteristics of the new governance, so consistent and reliable that they will be the very clothes the king wears. The poet dares to imagine that in place of the usual weapons of military office—sword, spear, and javelin—this king will be dressed in the saving regalia of loyal concern and love.

The poet finally launches into a lyrical celebration of newness that is as broad and large as all of creation; visions about wolf and lamb, leopard and kid, living together in peace and the lion eating straw (vs. 6-9). In our own time, we are learning, a little at a time, that human acts of injustice wreak havoc with the created order (witness the “greenhouse effect,” or the destruction of the Brazilian rain forests, or the Barrier Reef). Conversely, acts of human justice permit creation to function in a healthy, fruitful way. Thus the newness envisioned for creation follows properly from the newness of human justice.

Advent, I think, invites us to imagine “impossible” futures for our world, (perhaps like Isaiah’s vision) and then open ourselves to the power of the Spirit to lure us forward. Advent invites, but it also judges. Advent asks, “Where are we going in our personal lives? How far are we from the vision imagined by Isaiah, what is our role in God’s reign of justice and peace that we see revealed?”

Advent presents us with an invitation to partnership; partnership with God, and with God’s Spirit and Wisdom. God’s aims for creation and humanity are always somewhat at odds with our own plans and understandings. But it is this tension between them which invites us to imagine and then embody God’s vision of a new heaven and a new Earth. We are prone to hopelessness, as reflected in our complacency regarding the growing gap of wealthy and poor and the threats to the Earth through global climate change. Still, Advent’s horizon of hope inspires us to join a healing pilgrimage, with no certain destination, but with the knowledge that we embark on this pilgrimage with God.

The new possibilities of our lives and of creation depend on the wind, which the stump cannot withstand. That wind is blowing. Advent is our decision to trust the new wind against the hopeless stump of what has failed before.

In the name of God. Amen.