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Isaiah 11:1-10, Matthew 3:1-12
Changing Our Nature

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

For this morning's sermon, I am drawn toward our First Lesson, toward Isaiah's beautiful image of the peace that, in God's grace, is bound to dawn on this old earth of ours. Soon, I hope. Very soon! Isaiah speaks of the animals in that peaceable kingdom:

The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid¹, and the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. (Isaiah 11:6, RSV)

Now, the thing that fascinates me about this prophecy is that it is *against the nature* of the wolf to dwell in peace with the lamb. Against its nature! Wolves are the ones who pound on the door and shout to the three little pigs,

Little pig, little pig, let me come in.

And when the little pig says, "No, no, by the hair of my chiny chin chin," then it is *the nature of the wolf* to bellow:

Then I'll huff, and I'll puff, and I'll blow your house in.

But Isaiah speaks of a coming time when the wolf simply lies down and takes a nap beside the lamb. Heretofore, the wolf attacks and eats the lamb! But the day is coming when the wolf will change its ways, be a peaceable creature, and there will be no more hurt, no more dying, "and sorrow and sighing shall flee away," as Isaiah puts it in Chapter 35. (Isaiah 35:10, KJV)

Isaiah is not simply a poet here. More than a poet, he is a prophet. He is inspired by the Holy Spirit to speak for God, indeed to speak for God about the present realities and dangers surrounding Israel and Judah. Poor Isaiah lived in dangerous times, in the second half of the eighth century B.C. Most of his ministry was devoted to earnest pleading with the people that they should repent, return to the Lord, practice true faith, and establish justice and righteousness in the land before it was too late! They cannot delay, Isaiah preached, lest the Lord permit the great threat on the horizon to break upon them.

¹ A baby goat.

I mean the Assyrian empire. That empire was growing by leaps and bounds. It loomed like a gathering storm capable of wreaking destruction on all in its path. But Isaiah is not intimidated by Assyria. He believes that one day, that great empire would *change its nature* and become peaceful, even grateful to Israel.

If the mighty Assyrian king Tiglath-pileser III had heard the final verse of this morning's First Lesson, he would have laughed with scorn. In that last verse, Isaiah turned from his poetic speech about wolves and lambs and leopards and begins talk about international affairs. He speaks of "the nations," and means to include Assyria in his prophecy:

¹⁰In that day the root of Jesse shall stand as an ensign to the peoples; *him shall the nations seek*, and his dwellings shall be glorious. (Isaiah 11:10, RSV)

And so it is that Isaiah anticipates that the flag of the Messiah shall be established on earth, and all eyes will seek that flag and hasten toward it. All nations, including Assyria.

"Nonsense!" Tiglath-pileser would reply. "My mighty empire is not going to come seeking the root of Jesse. We are not going to gather under his standard. We will not seek his banner. Why, we will huff and we will puff and we will blow your house in!"

But Isaiah thinks to himself, "Well, we will see about that." For Isaiah foresees that there will come a time when this whole wide world will hunger and thirst for the Word of God. There will come a time when all of humanity will say of the Word of God what the Psalmist says,

⁸The statutes of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart: the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes.

⁹The fear of the LORD is clean, enduring for ever: the judgments of the LORD are true and righteous altogether.

¹⁰More to be desired are they than gold, yea, than much fine gold: sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb. (Psalm 19:8-10, KJV)

And in hungering for the Word of God, the world will flow toward Israel. Then, this world will be a better place, Isaiah believed. Much better! For when the Word of God grabs hold of the human heart, then it can change our nature. It can change a wolf into a lamb, a fisherman into an apostle, a sinner into a saint.

Now let's move ahead from the time of Isaiah to the time of John the Baptist. (You can see that handsome guy here on our church banner.) Like Isaiah of old, John was convinced that something was stirring, that Someone was coming. Watch out! He spoke of the One Isaiah had called the "root of Jesse." He spoke of Him as being at hand:

¹¹I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry; (Matthew 3:11, RSV)

And then, when he spied Jesus, John gave his great testimony:

The next day John seeth Jesus coming unto him, and saith, Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world. (John 1:29, KJV)

We believe that Jesus is Isaiah's "root of Jesse." We believe he is the long-awaited one of Israel. We believe that he is the one who can change a wolf into a lamb.

As proof, consider St. Paul. He was a man of violence until Jesus took hold of him. Listen to how Acts describes the man as he planned his assault on the Christians in Damascus:

¹But Saul, *still breathing threats and murder* against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest ²and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. (Acts 9:1, RSV)

Yet Christ tamed him. Saul might have breathed "threats and murder," but as surely as the wolf will learn to dwell in peace with the lamb, so Christ can take a headstrong, violent person and turn that one into a saint. Saul might have been a wolf, but Christ made him a gentle, patient, peaceful, and joyful Christian.

Christ can do the same for you and me. This means that we are not condemned to the way we presently are. We are not forced to sigh and to say, "Well, that's simply my nature. That's who I am. Can't change it." Can a leopard change its spots? Yes! In Christ.

There was a song back in 1997, I believe, by Fiona Apple called "Criminal." I think I've quoted from this song before because the words are so striking to me, so full of resignation, almost despair. She has done wrong. She has betrayed someone she loves. And she comes to her confessor pleading for a clean conscience again, but it is as she doubts that there is any hope for her:

Heaven help me for the way I am
Save me from these evil deeds before I get them done
I know tomorrow brings the consequence at hand
But I keep living this day like the next will never come

Oh help me but don't tell me to deny it
I've got to cleanse myself of all these lies 'till I'm good enough for him

I've got a lot to lose and I'm bettin' high so I'm begging you
Before it ends just tell me *where to begin*

Yet what hope does she have of even beginning to set things right when she thinks that her nature is just so very wrong. And so in her final appeal to her confessor, she wants to conduct herself as an angel, yet she refers to herself as the devil:

So what would an angel say the devil wants to know

But she is not a devil. She is not a devil! And none of you are either!

Indeed, if your soul were filled right up to the brim with devils, it would not matter. They *could not* stop you from changing and becoming better. Why, you could be possessed by Legion himself, a whole army of demons, as was that poor Gerasene demoniac of long ago. Yet when the poor man met Jesus, our Lord tamed him, so that when the townsfolk came out to find Legion, we hear this lovely description of what they found:

They came to Jesus and saw the demoniac sitting there, clothed and in his right mind, the very man who had had the legion... (Mark 5:15, NRSV)

The devils were gone. The torment was gone. The man was free of them and at peace at last.

If you are troubled in conscience at this time in life, then you have already begun to walk the path that will make you a new and better person. Continue on that path. If you measure yourself against the holy commandments of God and have enough honesty to find yourself lacking, then you have already drawn near to the good path of penitence. If you are mindful that you have been a heartbreak to people who love you, then already you are knocking on heaven's door, hoping to become better. What I want you to know is that you can succeed!

How did St. Paul, who knew something about sin and repentance, describe the Gospel? He felt himself compelled to speak of freedom:

But now that you have been *set free from sin* and have become slaves of God, the return you get is sanctification and its end, eternal life.
(Romans 6:22, RSV)

The devil might be "in bondage" to sin, but you are not! In that regard, the Brief Order for Confession and Forgiveness goes too far! You are not *in bondage* to sin, but simply *tempted* by sin. In this fallen world, sin clings closely to us, it is true. Yet it need not master *you*. You are not sin's slave. In Christ you are a free man, a free woman, a free girl, and free boy! Your freedom has been won for you at great cost by Jesus of Nazareth. Yes, freedom was won at great cost, but it is yours, to

enjoy. Seek it. Look for some path, some door, some open window that you can crawl through toward purity of heart and conduct. You are not condemned to fail.

And if you should fail and your conscience becomes troubled, then quick as you can, get back in the boat. That is what Confession and Absolution is for. Holy Baptism entrusts you to Christ, who forgives sin and asks you to go and sin no more. Your Baptism commits you to struggle against sin for the rest of your lives. And if you fail, then quick as you can return to your Baptism. Make your confession, mend your ways, and seek to walk with Jesus again.

You can make progress in saintliness. You can become what St. Paul calls a “mature” Christian. You can say to any particular temptation, “In the name of Christ, no. Go away!” And you can say this so many times that at last the devil gives up and goes away, so that that particular battle becomes easier, at least for a season. Many a sinner can testify to these things. Many a drunkard, many an angry person, many a licentious one can say, “I used to be plagued by my sin, but not so much any more. Christ called me on toward holiness of life, I gave it a try, and now I am stronger.”

God’s call to you, which you can feel right there in your heart, is a call you can answer. You can become more gentle, more pious, more Christlike. Yea, though you feel your heart to be flinty, a very heart of stone, your Maker can remake your heart. Indeed, that is precisely the challenge the Lord undertakes and asks you to act upon:

²⁶A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances. ²⁸You shall dwell in the land which I gave to your fathers; and you shall be my people, and I will be your God. (Ezekiel 36:26-28, RSV)

If you had been traveling a long while in the desert, tripping over stones, stumbling onwards, exhausted and dying of thirst, would you not be wise to accept some water if a good person stood before you offering you some? So it is with Jesus. He is risen, he is alive, he is here now, indeed wherever two or three are gathered together in his name. And he offers the parched one refreshment:

Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and *without price*. (Isaiah 55:1, NRSV)

Come to Christ. It is the daily rhythm of baptism². Sin leads us astray day by day, but Christ asks us to come back to him, climb back into the boat, walk with

² As Luther says in his discussion of Baptism:

Finally, we must also know what baptism signifies and why God ordained

him again, and find that he can change a wolf into a lamb, a sinner into a saint, you and me into his very disciples -- disciples of him to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.

precisely this sign and external ceremony for the sacrament by which we are first received into the Christian community. This act or ceremony consists of being dipped into the water, which covers us completely, and being drawn out again. These two parts, being dipped under the water and emerging from it, point to the power and effect of baptism, which is nothing else than the slaying of the old Adam and the resurrection of the new creature, both of which must continue in us our whole life long. Thus a Christian life is nothing else than a daily baptism, begun once and continuing ever after. For we must keep at it without ceasing, always purging whatever pertains to the old Adam, so that whatever belongs to the new creature may come forth. What is the old creature? It is what is born in us from Adam, irascible, spiteful, envious, unchaste, greedy, lazy, proud—yes—and unbelieving; it is beset with all vices and by nature has nothing good in it. Now, when we enter Christ's kingdom, this corruption must daily decrease so that the longer we live the more gentle, patient, and meek we become, and the more we break away from greed, hatred, envy, and pride. (Martin Luther, *Large Catechism*, Of Baptism.)