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Isaiah 11:1-10; Matthew 3:1-12

CHRISTMAS CARDS

It's that time of the year when I actually look forward to opening my mail box each day, because, mixed in with the catalogs and the bills, I discover Christmas cards sent to me from family and friends near and far. Some of us still practice the custom of wishing one another Merry Christmas by sending Christmas cards. With these cards we include various messages. Sometimes we share the events of our lives over the past year. Usually we include a message of hope for the recipient of the card that the upcoming holiday and the new year will be filled with happiness, health, and joy.

Today, scripture hands us two Christmas cards with messages for this season and for the upcoming new year.

The first Christmas card comes from the prophet Isaiah. And on the cover of the card we have this lovely image, sometimes referred to as "the Peaceable Kingdom." Isaiah gives us the image of former foes and enemies residing in harmony next to one another: the wolf and the lamb, the leopard and the young goat, the calf and the lion can be found lying side by side. And when we open this metaphorical card, we read Isaiah's message. Isaiah writes, "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 cover the sea." Isaiah hands us a Christmas message of hope that one day, God will bring forth such a radical kind of peace that all creation shall be transformed into a community of peace and harmony.

This is a beautiful, hope-filled image. It is precisely the kind of image and message we like to use for our own Christmas cards.

The second Christmas card we are metaphorically handed this season is from John the Baptist. On this card we have the image of a wild-eyed, wild-haired, disheveled prophet, pointing his finger accusingly at us. And when we open the card, we read his message: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance.”

Now honestly, given the choice between these two cards, which one would you pick? The answer is pretty clear. Isaiah’s serene image of the Peaceable Kingdom is the comforting message we all want to hear. We forget that just before Isaiah offered us this lovely vision, he was filled with words of judgment toward the people of God for their injustice and evil practices, especially toward the poor and vulnerable. In that way, Isaiah is a lot like John the Baptist. Before Isaiah gives us hope for transformation, he too comes to us with words of judgment and a call to change.

But sometimes, sometimes we like to forget Isaiah’s entire message, and in this time of year we focus our attention on the words we read today, his words about a harmonious world of peace. And we can tend to romanticize Isaiah’s hope-filled words about a peaceable kingdom where enemies, even animal foes, live in harmony with one another. Woody Allen, the famous actor and cinematographer, is quoted as stating that the day may come when the lion will lie down with the lamb, but the lamb isn’t going to get much sleep!

Woody Allen’s quip reminds us that real peace cannot be mere window dressing. For genuine peace to exist, the lamb needs to have utter confidence that it won’t become tomorrow’s breakfast. For real peace to exist, fundamental change is required within our human hearts.

That fundamental change is what John the Baptist is calling for when he calls us to repent. That word “repentance” is not always a comfortable one for us. It seems so harsh and unkind and judgmental. Sometimes the call to repent is used like a weapon to bludgeon people over the head with fear for their eternal souls. "Repent or else" is sometimes the message. But that is not what repentance is really about. Repenting will not make God love you more-- because God already loves you. And failing to repent will not make God hate you or reject you. Because God never rejects anyone. So, we don't repent of our behaviors in order to change God or how God feels about us. Isn't that refreshing to know! We already have God's love.

Repentance, which means turning our lives toward God and God's ways, is something we do because we realize *we* need God and God's ways. We need to walk the way of God--because walking our own way in this world has clearly not benefitted us or, perhaps most importantly, walking our own way has clearly not benefitted other people in our world.

This week the murderer who carried out the massacre at TOPS grocery store here in Buffalo pled guilty to the charges against him. Afterward, some of the family members of those killed or wounded in the shooting spoke to reporters about their feelings, not just about the sentencing, but about the underlying racism in our society that gave rise to this massacre, and about the fact that this white shooter was taken into police custody alive and unharmed when so many people of color do not come away from even minor police encounters with their lives preserved. In speaking to the reporters, one of the family members said this: She said, “We need to park right here. We don't need to go in fast forward or drive.” She continued, “America needs to park right here and ask ourselves ‘why’? Why do we change the narrative for black men and call 9, 10, and 11 year old boys ‘men’ while so many keep speaking of the white shooter as a boy

or young man? Why do people say that white supremacy is not real?” She said, “We need to park right here.”

That is what John the Baptist is calling each of us to do personally and all of us to do collectively: to park right here. To take an honest account of ourselves and our communities. Fundamental change is needed if we want to see reconciliation in our communities and reconciliation in our families and reconciliation within our own hearts and souls. Enemies have to do more than just pose for a photo op. They have to care about one another’s welfare with every fiber of their being and live consistently in ways that ensure one another’s flourishing.

The same is true for each of us personally. John the Baptist looks at us and says, quit pretending. Quit pretending that your lives are neat and orderly. Quit pretending that there are not dark corners of your heart or lives that need addressing, no values that need reordering, no habits that need altering. John the Baptist calls us to “park right here,” and to repent, and to turn our lives in the direction of God.

The hope you and I have for ourselves or our world, the hope we have for that wonderful vision of a peaceable kingdom, is actually rooted in this message of repentance. Transformation is only possible when we take stock of our lives, our brokenness, our flaws, and then turn toward God and God’s ways. The cards this holiday wishing you peace and joy and happiness may fill your mailbox. But the hope you and I have for realizing these gifts begins with truth telling, honesty, and repentance.