

**Stand as a Signal**

## COMMUNION

December 4, 2022

**Isaiah 11:1-10**

<sup>1</sup> A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. <sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> 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; <sup>4</sup> 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.

<sup>5</sup> Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins. <sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>7</sup> The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. <sup>8</sup> The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. <sup>9</sup> They will 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. <sup>10</sup> On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious.

**Romans 15:4-13**

<sup>4</sup> For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope. <sup>5</sup> May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, <sup>6</sup> so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

<sup>7</sup> Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. <sup>8</sup> 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 patriarchs, <sup>9</sup> and in order 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”; <sup>10</sup> and again he says, “Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people”; <sup>11</sup> and again, “Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples praise him”; <sup>12</sup> and again Isaiah says, “The root of Jesse shall come, the one who rises to rule the Gentiles; in him the Gentiles shall hope.” <sup>13</sup> May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

### Matthew 3:1-12

<sup>1</sup> In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, <sup>2</sup> “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” <sup>3</sup> 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.’ ” <sup>4</sup> Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. <sup>5</sup> Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, <sup>6</sup> and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

<sup>7</sup> 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? <sup>8</sup> Bear fruit worthy of repentance. <sup>9</sup> 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.

<sup>10</sup> *Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.* <sup>11</sup> *“I 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 fire.* <sup>12</sup> *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.”*

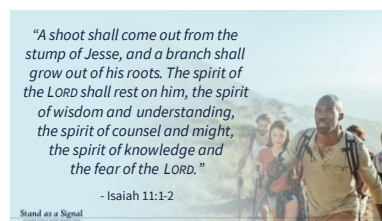


Welcome to the second Sunday of Advent! Today you are invited to make a declaration, to choose to stand as a signal of hope. In this time together we will be invited to heed the

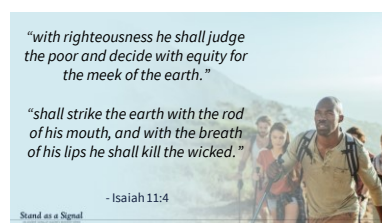
call of John the Baptist to *“bear fruit worthy of the kingdom of God.”* We will be asked to play our parts in bringing about the peaceable kingdom envisioned in our text from Isaiah 11. You are invited to take a stand for the promise that Jesus offers – the promise of a beloved community found in a new way of living in the world.

On this communion Sunday we step into both the past and the future of the Advent season and we take time to celebrate the current joy found in living with Christ as Lord and Savior. We look back to the incarnation and to the glory of that first Christmas. We also look forward to the completion of God’s plan for creation and for each of us as followers of Christ. Today we remember that the Christ we celebrate did not remain a baby, but grew to offer his life for ours, his body and his blood for the forgiveness of our sins. Today we celebrate a joyous acceptance of this gift of life offered and shared with Christ and one another. As we begin this time together, let us pray...

Turn with me to Isaiah 11 as we begin. This passage was written about 800 years before Christ lived yet speaks both to his coming almost 2,000 years ago and to the time of his return – a time longed for yet unfulfilled. Speaking to a people who must have been without hope, Isaiah says, *“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 the fear of the LORD.”* Isaiah prophesies a time to come when a new ruler will come with wisdom and understanding, with knowledge and a fear of God. These words of hope and promise would have been hard to hear in their situation. Their leaders – both political and religious – have failed them. Israel has just been decimated by the Babylonians. All lies in ruins, and most have been carted off into exile. That present reality would be hard to see past.



Yet this promise and vision point to a new time, to a new hope. Isaiah prophesies that this shoot of Jesse’s stump will not judge or decide with eyes or ears. This branch will possess a justice and righteousness that come from much deeper within. The heart of this new ruler will be guided by the Spirit of God, and this will lead the shoot of Jesse to champion the cause of the poor and the meek. In verse 4 we read, *“with righteousness he shall judge the poor and decide with equity for the meek of the earth.”* As a champion of justice and righteousness, he *“shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.”* Crushed by the Babylonians, can you imagine how the Israelites clung to these words of hope, to this promise of a day yet to come?



Yet a part of this defeated nation – probably a large part – must’ve also heard these words as words that spoke of a new king, of a mighty warrior. This dream of a new and powerful king David would make it hard for the people of Jesus’ day to see him as this promised Messiah. They longed for a warrior king who would stand as a signal to all other nations, pronouncing that God is once again on Israel’s side. Yes, this prophecy does speak of how God is on Israel’s side. But Jesus was the Prince of Peace, the good shepherd, the humble servant. In verses 6-9 Isaiah casts a vision of God's ultimate plan for creation.



Here we read of how the wolf will live with the lamb, of how the cow will graze with the bear, of how the lion shall eat straw like the ox, of how the nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp. These verses feel almost impossible, don't they? The wolf with the lamb! The child playing beside the snake's den. Could it ever be possible? And then there, in verse 6 we read, *"And a little child will lead them."* This, I believe, is God's way of saying, "With me, all things are possible." The least among you shall lead. The one at the bottom of the ladder will be the savior. The Prince of Peace, the good shepherd, the humble servant – he will lead God's people. *"On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious."*



The root of Jesse stands as a signal, as a banner; the nations will rally to him, and his place of rest will be glorious. The wolf will live with the lamb, the cow will graze with the bear, the lion shall eat straw like the ox, the nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp. There will be peace in this new kingdom of God.

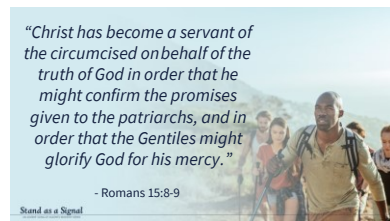
It is at this time of year that we can imagine this reign of peace. During the Christmas season we can latch onto a glimmer of hope and think that maybe this vision of a new kingdom of peace is possible. In this season we can dare to entertain the idea that peace on earth is possible. Maybe that idea is hard to entertain for you. It certainly was for the Israelites living in captivity. Some may think that only happens in the movies. Only in Charlie Brown's Christmas and in the Grinch, when his heart grew three sizes that day. Only there does peace on earth seem possible. Only there does it work out. It certainly doesn't in all of our homes and corporations, in our economics and politics. Some would say that peace is impossible in the real world.

Maybe that could be true – unless some are willing to work and suffer for peace, unless some are willing to sacrifice and to serve others, living out a different way of being in the world. Unless some were willing to stand as a signal to a better way, to witness to the power of the Prince of Peace. Turn with me to Romans 15 to learn how the root of Jesse is our hope, our joy, and our peace.

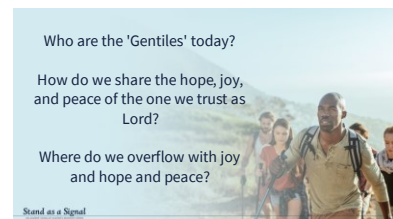


Here in Romans 15 Paul enters the place where prophesy connects to following Christ. And then he moves forward, into the future of the church. Paul begins by lifting up the Old Testament, saying that the scriptures of old were written to teach us, to encourage us, to give us endurance. In the words of the prophets, we hear the call to live in a spirit of unity, speaking and living with one heart and one mouth, all to glorify God. Paul encourages us to welcome one another just as Christ welcomed all. These words to the Christians living in Rome would have been challenging. This church was made up of mostly Jews living in diaspora. They fought against widening the circle.

The church in Rome struggled to open its doors to those outside the Jewish faith and traditions. They wanted to hold onto the Law, to use that as a means to guard access to Christ. This is why Paul writes, in verses 8-9, 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 patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy.”* Can you hear Paul urging the Roman Christians to open wide their doors and their hearts to the Gentiles, to those who were non-believers?



To further encourage them to accept others, Paul then quotes four Old Testament passages about God reaching out to the Gentiles. He closes with these words of hope: *“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”* Paul equates loving others as Christ loved others as the key to hope. These words also stand as a signal to us - guiding us in ministry. To that point we must ask: Who are the 'Gentiles' today? *Who are those outside of our circles?...* How do we share the hope, joy, and peace of the one we trust as Lord? *How do we share these things with those without?...* Where do we overflow with joy and hope and peace? *How does this overflowing touch other people's lives?...*



If we are to stand as a signal of peace and hope and joy, we must wrestle with these questions. As we look to our gospel reading next, please turn with me to Matthew 3. Here we find John the Baptist, one who stood as a signal of hope.



Here we find some guidance on how to find and engage the ‘Gentiles,’ on how to share and overflow with joy, hope, and peace. John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming, “*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.*” John came preaching repentance, calling people to prepare their hearts for the coming of the Lord. In verse 4-6 we read about John's whole package - clothes, food, location, message – and about how they drew people to him. John was so different, so radical compared to the normal religious folk, that he attracted people to his words and ministry. Again, a question for us: How can what we offer to others and to the world be so radical that people notice and are attracted to Jesus? Put another way, how can we love in such a way that others sit up and take notice?

We do not need to be noticed in a bad way. That can happen, right? Again, the question is: How do we love and live in ways that draws others to the hope, peace, and joy that we find and have in Christ? Both the prophets Isaiah and Paul gave us direction. Isaiah lifted the call to help the needy and the poor. He also called us to work to help realize God's vision for a peaceable kingdom. Paul reminded us of Jesus encouragement to reach out to the 'Gentiles.' All of these are ways that we are to actively and positively live as children of light and love out in the world.

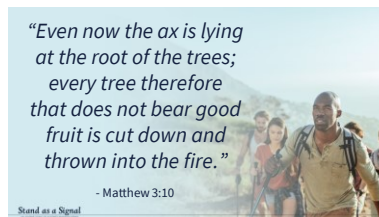
In the second half of our gospel lesson from Matthew 3, John the Baptist addresses those who just wanted to appear religious. Starting in verse 7, he addresses the looky-loos. John speaks harsh words of condemnation to some of the oppressors of his day, the Pharisees and Sadducees. (Yes, the Romans are still around too.) John challenged these leaders to “*bear fruit worthy of repentance.*” He is saying, don’t just come out here because others are coming out.



Don't just come to see all the fuss and maybe even to make a show of repentance by being baptized – if they dared. He is calling for a changed life that reflects a changed heart. Then stand as a signal of God's love and grace.

John warns, don't just try to claim Abraham as your ancestor, either. Just empty words, fellas. Don't claim that some relative was a good Jew, so you're covered. And don't say you go to temple every Sabbath and tithe a tenth and follow all these other rules. Don't say you go to church most weeks and drop an offering in the plate when you're there. Actually live a life of faith that bears good fruit, live a life that changes other people's lives and circumstances. Live a life of love that brings healing and wholeness to the hurt and brokenness of the world.

He warns, *“Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”* The roots are the patriarchs –



Abraham, Moses, Elijah, David, Joshua, Jacob. Yes, they are foundational. Yes, they have something to teach and to offer. But your faith is not their faith. Their faith cannot be your faith. Your life, your faith, that is what must produce good fruit. This rot in the religious system that John called out was just as dangerous as the rot and sin that led to exile in Isaiah's day – to days of death and destruction, days of despair and sorrow. These words of warning also give us a vision, a plan. These words call us to be people who bear good fruit.

As we draw to a close and to share an example of how simple it can be to bear good fruit in the world, let me share this example from one of the devotionals I read this past week: “At the drive-through window of a coffee shop, a customer spontaneously paid for the order of the next car in line. It was an act of pure kindness and generosity. When the next car reached the window and discovered that the



person in front had already paid, they were so touched that they, in turn, paid for the order of the next person in line. This chain of generosity continued for more than 200 people. Upon discovering that the person ahead had paid for their order, each customer was inspired to pay for the next person's. The kindness was contagious. I imagine that the person who initiated this beautiful chain of love had no idea of the fruit that this one act of kindness would bear.”

Have ever experienced this before? Have you ever initiated something like this before? When I've been blessed, it has made me want to bless others – to pay it forward, so to speak, like in the example that I just shared. But when I have been the one to initiate this possible scenario, when I have offered this small gift to the person behind me in line – whether at a coffee shop, McDonald's, or wherever – it has been a whole other level of joy and happiness that I have felt. Yet drive away as fast as I can because just saying thanks to me isn't as impactful on that next person's life. I want that person to do something nice for someone else, to experience what it feels like to offer an act of love to another. I want that act of love and kindness and generosity to become contagious, like it did in the example from the devotional.

Isaiah promised a new branch rising from the stump of Jesse, one that stood with and for the poor and the meek, one that stood for righteousness, justice, and faithfulness. Paul reminded us that as Christians we are sent to the ‘Gentiles,’ to share the hope we find in the “*root of Jesse*.” John the Baptist challenged us to repent and to prepare our hearts to receive the Lord so that we can stand as a signal, as hope for the world.



In each of these passages, we are reminded that hope can come from despair and that living as light and love is not only possible but is called for right now. The promises of Isaiah and Paul and John tell us that living a life that honors God and neighbor is not only possible but is within our reach. Friends, when we love, when we welcome, when we share Emmanuel, God with us, we will stand as a signal to the nations that God is among us and that through God we can know and live with peace and hope and joy. We are called to stand as a signal. This Advent may we live out this call, bearing good fruit for the kingdom of God. May it be so for you and for me. Amen and amen.

### **GPS – Grow, Pray, Study**

- 1) *Grow*. This week, what good fruit can you bear in your life? Specifically, how can you bring another peace or hope or joy? Maybe all three?
- 2) *Pray*. Where do you need the one who “*baptizes with fire*” to “*burn away the chaff*” of your life? Invite Jesus to do just that this week.
- 3) *Study*. Read Matthew 11:25-30. This somewhat contrasts with the idea of one who baptizes with fire. How can Jesus be both fire and rest for the weary? How can he be the greatest in the kingdom and also gentle and humble in heart?