

Advent 2. December 8, 2013. Isaiah 11:1-10, Romans, 15: 4-13. Matthew 3:1-12
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From the first time – 13 years ago – I spoke at any event involving other Episcopalians outside of our parish in our diocese I've always introduced myself the same way: "My name is Nigel Taber-Hamilton, from St. Augustine's in-the-Woods on Whidbey Island; do come and see us sometime". After a while people got to expect hearing that from anyone from St. Augustine's, to the extent, Lynda Anderson once told me, that when she didn't say it after introducing herself at a Stewardship meeting in Seattle someone interrupted her and said "you forgot to issue the invitation!"

I suppose a communications expert – like, say, Harry Anderson! – would could that "staying o message"! It says "you're welcome" – and the hospitality and fellowship that lies behind that welcome is surely at the core of who we try to be here.

Today's readings also stay on message. With an insistent voice they yearn for justice, and particularly for a time when we will live in the love of God and of each other, a time when all creation will be reconciled.

That's the time Isaiah speaks of, when the world will be turned upside-down. Violent creatures become peaceful – like docile farm animals. The strong and the weak lie down together in equal relationship. Justice and respect for "those-not-like-us" will be the law of the land. The afflicted will be raised up. And the One who will come and bring this justice and compassion will have such a gentleness about him that natural enemies will be helplessly propelled into peace with each other.

What I remember of family life in my first seven years was a mixed bag – some very happy times, some very ordinary times, some sad times. When I reached seven they were separated. Ultimately that separation would end in divorce, though at the time I didn't really understand what was going on. My mother and brother and I went to live with our grandmother. I used to wonder when we'd get back together as a family, and often, as I later walked home from school, I'd enter into that land of make-believe where everything's possible. I dreamed that as I walked round the last corner my father would be there, sitting in his car, smiling, ready to take me back to the family home where I'd find my mother and brother waiting. And every time I came to that corner I half-expected that it would be so, that what was broken would be restored, a family reconciled back to wholeness.

Just two days ago Nelson Mandela died. Among all the things that stand out that have been said about him, the oft repeated was how his natural gentleness and compassion, wedded with his urgent voice for justice, led inevitably toward peace. It is one of the great moments of our age when that identity led to the Truth and Justice Commission – chaired by Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu – a moment almost unparalleled in history that has restored and reconciled a nation, that set it on the pathway to wholeness and peace.

That yearning on every level – personal, communal, national – for wholeness, for

restoration, for reconciliation, for peace is, I think, at the core of all of today's readings. That's exactly the same sort of yearning for wholeness, for restoration, for reconciliation that provokes in all us similar hopes - that all that is broken will be restored, all that's grown old will be made new, that the peaceable kingdom will overwhelm the world of violence, that all that's scattered will be brought back into unity with itself.

Those themes permeate even the words of John the Baptist! You know, if he showed up today and acted the way he does in the gospels we'd have him locked up in a "secure facility", doped up on anti-psychotic drugs! He's a wild figure, spewing picturesque images about the future, swearing at the wealthy and prominent folk who've come to have a "baptism experience" only because it's the "in" thing to do. Eugene Peterson's version of the bible - "The Message" - translates John's words to these self-important citizens like this: "What do you think you're doing slithering down here to the river? Do you think a little water on your snakeskins is going to make any difference? It's your life that must change, not your skin!" (Peterson translation).

"It's your life that must change!" That's at the core of the Christian message: the yearning for wholeness, for restoration, for reconciliation, for peace will only be fulfilled by a changed life. And it doesn't begin somewhere else; it begins with us. We're called to re-examine the patterns we've fallen into, look for the places where we've lost focus, reflect on those less than stellar ways we've been living, and reorient ourselves: changed lives, changed perspective.

Part of my family has lived on the Isle of Wight for nearly a hundred years. The I.O.W's that 11 mile long/4 mile wide island that sits in the mouth of the estuary that leads to the southern port of Southampton. It's right off the south coast of England. My family have been fisherman and boat builders since they arrived there. I remember when I was about 13 and down on the island for vacation, my Uncle Jim - really my great uncle - decided, even though he was retired, to take my brother Martin and me out on his fishing boat. He still called it "his" even though he'd given it to his son Rick years before, and Rick had eventually given it to his son. Now my cousin Jack was, in Uncle Jim's words, - "sloppy" about his boat. I couldn't tell. Everything on the boat looked okay to me. But then Uncle Jim starting hefting coiled rope up off the deck and into lockers, picking up gutting tools and putting them on clasped hooks, and generally doing little things that in later life I might have called "obsessive!"

He must have noticed me looking at him because he stopped and said, "If a rogue wave were to hit us we'd lose all this stuff overboard." "And," he continued, "if you get sloppy here you'll be sloppy elsewhere. Pretty soon you'll forget to batten down a hatch properly, or latch a water-tight door, and the next thing you know they'll be sending out rescue boats looking for you.

"Changing our ways" is the meaning of repentance - it's not about feeling sorry for what's in the past - which, after, is just that: past, and as such unchangeable. It's about refocusing our attention on the present and the future, seeing them with the transformed eyes of faith, and then living into the vision. It's about picking up the casually discarded tools of our faith and putting them in their proper lockers, about paying attention to what's really important, seeing what we need to do and then doing it, as we sail life's seas.

The language of this changing is the language of baptism - of dying to the old self and rising with Christ. New life from that which is dead, the transformation of ourselves through the gift-giving of another.

“And a new shoot will spring from the stump of Jesse....” Christ, the stump that humanity continues – that we continue – to cut down continues, too, to put forth the shoots of new life.

We join in that dying and rising in baptism, which blesses us with the same Spirit that led Christ to let himself be cut down by us, and to trust that God brings new sprouts of life out of such things, new roots.....that God brings new life out of our own wounded stumpiness. That yearning for wholeness, for restoration, for reconciliation, for peace, that yearning that will only be fulfilled by a changed life: that’s the new life of Christ that can live in us if we make it so.

So it is that Paul’s great blessing to the Roman believers is conferred on us, too: that “the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that in the power of the Holy Spirit you may be rich in hope.” (Rom. 15: 13)

If we live this Advent out of Isaiah’s vision and God’s spiritual baptism, then Paul’s blessing will surely be ours! And we will be marching forward beside the great saints of our faith – like Nelson Mandela – on that journey into wholeness, restoration, reconciliation, and peace. Amen.