

## Our Advent Judge

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The Second Sunday of Advent  
Holy Communion  
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Isaiah 11:1-10; Romans 15:4-6; Matthew 3:1-12

“He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth.”  
-- Isaiah 11:3-4

If you've spent any time in a shopping mall recently – and who's been able to avoid that? -- you've doubtless heard over the PA system that familiar Christmas song that asks, “Do you see what I see?” and “Do you hear what I hear?” and “Do you know what I know?” and so forth. As songs of the season go, it's not bad, pointing us eventually to the child who will bring us goodness and light. If you were here last week, you heard me say then that Advent hope is not as much about the first coming of that child as it is about the second coming of the savior whom we believe was incarnate in that child, but that's a lot of theology to ask from a popular Christmas song, so let's not find fault.

Indeed, let's celebrate the fact that even in the midst of our most secular, commercialized, hyper-materialistic, consumption-driven, acquisitive society – the mall, for short – the word is out that the true meaning of this season lies deeper than sitting on Santa's lap. Even as Christians bemoan the trivialization of the faith that reduces the mystery of God incarnate to silver bells and Frosty, let's rejoice in the fact that the message of the prophet Isaiah, on which this morning's sermon is based, is seeping out into a culture that doesn't even know how desperately it needs that message.

“He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth.”

That's the ideal king Isaiah envisioned, not just for his people, but for all people, and not simply for people, but for the entire creation. That king wouldn't be like the four kings of Judah Isaiah knew in the eighth century before Christ: Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. They were what we would call real kings or historical figures. They were the sorts of kings some archaeologists dig to find traces of to prove the truth of the Bible's claims.

If the prophet Isaiah met some of those archaeologists today, I strongly suspect he'd tell them to stop digging; to put down their trowels and stop trying to find the truth of the Bible in the ruins of ancient civilizations. I strongly suspect Isaiah would tell many of today's biblical archaeologists that the real king they should be seeking didn't live in the eighth century or the seventh or the first or the twenty-first. The king of our dreams hasn't lived at all, at least not in any way that our eyes can see or our ears can hear. We're still waiting for that king and that judge.

Yes, we Christians say the little baby Jesus was that king, but he disavowed the sort of realm all of us, including all of us Christians, look for and hope for and work for. Realms as we know them: marching armies, flashing steel, flags snapping in the breeze. Armies to defend nations with robust economies with high consumer spending and trade agreements in our favor. Low inflation, low unemployment, high GDP. Keeping the war over there so we don't have to fight it over here.

Those are the sorts of signs we look for to define the prosperity that we keep hoping will bring us security, happiness, and peace, and God help the president or candidate who doesn't share that vision with us.

But Isaiah, who was a prophet and not an economic advisor or political strategist, envisioned a different sort of leader, one who judged on the basis of different criteria. We want liberty and justice for all, but God's righteous judge ensures liberty and justice for the poor and the meek. Why? Because the rich and powerful will ensure it for themselves. They have the means to do so and they'll use those means to make sure that they get their share and more without regard for what's right and fair and just for the little people. That's the way the world's been and that's the way it always will be. That's not a faith statement; it's an observation based on what my eyes and ears tell me and what the eyes and ears of lots of other people have told them over the centuries. So if you want to be on the winning team in this world, stockpile your weapons, pad your Swiss bank account, and keep your attention firmly fixed on your own best interests.

But if you want a different world – truly different, and not simply a tinkered version of this one – you'll have to judge things differently. You'll have to use different criteria to make decisions, based on different priorities from those the world will hand you, and using different methods from those the world says work. If you want a different world, this isn't an option, it's a necessity, because, as psychologists point out, one of the definitions of insanity is to keep doing the same thing expecting different results. By that definition, the world has some serious mental health issues.

And the church has always known that the world needs a major re-think about a lot of things, which is why, during this season of waiting and hoping, the reading from Isaiah is paired with the gospel reading about John, that fiery-tongued baptizer who preached repentance. The message of John and the message of Isaiah look so different on the surface, but underneath both runs the all-important biblical message of change. From beginning to end, the Bible speaks of change because those inspired by God's Holy Spirit to give us the message of salvation knew that the world as we have it and know it and in many ways love it is not the world God has and knows and loves. That world is so different from this one that Isaiah uses topsy-turvy imagery to describe it: wolves live with lambs, leopards lie down with baby goats, and lions eat straw like oxen.

When the church reads out those texts to itself and to the world at this time of year, some people, including many church people, first nod their heads in agreement and then shake their heads sadly and say, "Yes, yes, that's all well and good, but it's not the real world, which is cold and heartless and bloodthirsty." In that world, as Woody Allen so famously and cynically put it some years ago, "The lion and the lamb shall lie down together, but the lamb won't get much sleep."

The season of Advent, friends, isn't about sleeping, it's about waking up. It's about waking up to a reality that includes this world but is not limited to or defined by this world. It's about waking up to the miracle that God has not abandoned us to fend for ourselves. It's about waking up to a larger, richer reality whose beauty and worth and success are judged not with the eyes and ears and minds the world gives us, but with the standards of righteousness and justice and peace given to us by God.

And for that judging, we have already been given a model. Our Advent judge, for whom we wait and hope and work, does not judge with the mouthy heat of chef Gordon Ramsay or the insults of a Simon Cowell or the rapid-fire decisions of Judge Judy. The Advent judge for whom we wait and hope and prepare sees not only this world, which needs our labor and love, but another, better world as well. We change this world by striving to live more and more in that one, not when we get to heaven, but when we wake up and realize that heaven has come to us.

Advent is indeed a time of waiting for change, and that which needs to change is not God, but us. We believe God changed and changed everything by taking our human form and living and dying and rising among us. The question, therefore, is not when will God change, but rather when will we?

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”