

Sermon: Stumped

Year A, Advent 2

[Isaiah 11:1-10; Psalm 72:1-7,18-19; Romans 15:4-13; Matthew 3:1-12](#)

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Rev. Catherine A. Merrill

Where are you with the election? He's just been in such a bad place since her death. Ever since the iPhone 6, they can't seem to find their way. They haven't had anything new on their menu in months; they don't seem to know how to move on.

Location matters. But sometimes a GPS doesn't help.¹ Advent is about location, in time and space, about which way we're facing and what we plan to do about that. In Advent we look forward to Christ's second coming. We are assured of his return because he has already come once.

If we want to get our bearings, it seems like the last thing we need is a wild man, in weird clothes, eating weird food shouting at us, "You brood of vipers!" (Matthew 3:7). Right now I think I'd be thrown off by a dear friend quietly mentioning that my shoe is untied. Yet there is John, shouting and baptizing and trying to get the people of Israel to turn around, to repent, to face in a different direction. Clearly John feels incredible urgency. He describes failure in such stark terms. You either turn or burn.² You would think with that passion inside him, he'd have gone to where all the people are, to the center of the population, to the center of economic and political power, where his voice will be heard by the most people

But he hasn't. He's at the river Jordan, which is about as far as you can go in Israel and still stay inside of Israel.³ He wants people to come to him to the edge, away from the centers of power that the Roman Empire was so anxious to reinforce.⁴ Because there is something they need to know, really know, not just with their brains, but with the soles of their feet and the linings of their noses. God leads us into wilderness so change can happen. John the Baptist is shouting at the crowds who have come to him, "Remember the Exodus story. Remember when you too were slaves in Egypt, when you were the stranger in a foreign land, when you were powerless and oppressed. God found you and led you into the wilderness." Because when they remember the wilderness, they remember the hesitancy and resistance⁵ that the people showed there. They remember asking how long this horrible time in the wilderness was going to last.⁶ When they remember the wilderness, they remember that God continued leading them, that the wilderness came between bondage and the Promised Land, that they entered by crossing the River Jordan. Sometimes you have to stand away from the center of the hustle and bustle, away from the powers and principalities, to see what God is up to.

¹Raymond R. Roberts, "Matthew 3:1-12." Interpretation 59, no. 4 (2005): 396.

²Roberts, 398.

³Roberts, 297.

⁴William R. Herzog II, "Second Sunday in Advent, Exegetical Perspective, Matthew 3:1-12" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 1*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY:Westminster John Knox Press, 2010], 45 & 47.

⁵David Bartlett, "Second Sunday in Advent, Pastoral Perspective, Matthew 3:1-12" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 1*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY:Westminster John Knox Press, 2010], 46.

⁶Roberts, 397.

John gets his followers to turn around from their current path by looking back into the past. Because they are stuck. Like stumps. Nothing more is going to come from their current direction. No good fruit (Matthew 3:10). Nothing productive. He wants them to look into the past so they can see that the Messiah they wait for in the future was already planned for in God's past.⁷

John wants them to turn around, to repent, to face a new future. John wants us to do that. That's why we read this passage during Advent, when it is so important to remember that we are waiting for the Christ child's return, not the rerun of a Christmas special we saw as kids.

If we are to repent, we can certainly make a list of places where we dropped the ball. If we just think back over the past week, we can all come up with one or two things. Heck, I can probably come up with one or two things if I just think back over the past couple of hours. But if that is the kind of repentance we offer, where are we at the end? We're still living our old lives, with some small, technical upgrades, still heading in the wrong direction, still stuck as stumps. What we need is not merely John's kind of repentance, a kind of preparation for what is to come, but Jesus' repentance, a detaching from the limitations of powers of this world because we have attached to Jesus' grace in our life.⁸

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. (Isaiah 11:1) Isaiah places royalty before us, Jesse, the father of King David. Kings are endless sources of hope and new possibilities in ancient Israel.⁹ How different are we from them, hoping that a presidential election will change the entrenched realities we face today? When wolves and lambs lie down together today, the lambs do not get up (Isaiah 11:6). We all know how many children these days put their hands on the adder's' dens (Isaiah 11:8) of drug addiction, white supremacy, inadequate education and their lives collapse and end in despair.¹⁰ They are as dead and stuck as any stump. That is the reality of this world and we have to face it. Because the hope for the future flows from the past through the present and we have to look at the present to catch a glimpse of the future.

So we need our prophets, in their weird clothes, to stand on the edges of our world and point out what is also reality. A shoot comes out of the stump. Possibility grows forth where we least expect it. Is Donald Trump the shoot coming out of the stump of our political system? We will see. Looking at the past, it is more likely that God's healing will come from common people. Called out of their ordinary lives by the Spirit of the Lord (Isaiah 11:1), which in Hebrew is also the Breath of Life, the Wind of Change. That wind blows into regular people's lives and they are destabilized, decentered, disoriented.¹¹ They break with all the normal niceties of their old lives.¹² They then blow us away as they point out the myriad of opportunities for peace, for economic justice and righteousness. Isaiah points out that they too are dressed funny: peacemakers do not wear the usual costumes of greed and fear and anxiety and despair. They

⁷Bartlett, 48.

⁸James Arne Nestingen, "The Matthean Advent Gospels." *Word & World* 12, no. 4 (1992): 410.

⁹Walter Brueggemann, "Peacemaking: An Evangelical Possibility." *Church & Society* 81, no. 1 (1990): 9.

¹⁰Brueggemann, 10.

¹¹Brueggemann, 11.

¹²Brueggemann, 11.

change clothes and are dressed, every day, in the caring clothes of righteousness, faithfulness, and equity.¹³

Imagine asking your grandparents what was more likely, a cow and a bear grazing together (Isaiah 11:7) or blacks and whites eating at the same lunch counter. As impossible as it is to imagine a different result with the teeth and claws of the end Isaiah's vision, that's how impossible it is for us to imagine economic and social justice in this country, where every addict gets the care she needs to recover, where every race is treated with dignity, where every God given gift is nurtured regardless if the child comes from the heart of the inner city or the rural edges of our country. But the vision of Isaiah is a reminder that God has promised just exactly that. That regular people change the world with God's help into the image that God has put forth.

We have been baptized into that promise.¹⁴ We have heard the Good News that Jesus the Messiah has offered. When we were baptized and when we witness the baptism of others, we promise to not view the world simply as it is, where the weak and the vulnerable are food for the mighty. We may have forgotten that from time to time, getting used to living in fear and hate and when something new sweeps into our world, we reach for more fear and hate.

We need to look into the past and remember what we have inherited and what we can build on. When we repent, we can turn away from where we were heading and set out in a new direction. The name of the first peacemaker was *adam*, male and female, ordained to foster peace in creation, but who reneged. The family of David, with the first son named *Shalomon*, was ordained to bring peace, but grew greedy and reneged. Then came this Jesus, who wept over the war-culture of the city and summoned peacemakers whom he called blessed. And then there is us, still in the office of *adam*, still claiming the promises of David, and still in the band of Jesus, baptized to break the vicious cycles of fear and hate.¹⁵

¹³Brueggemann, 14.

¹⁴Brueggemann, 19.

¹⁵Brueggemann, 20.