

"God's Ax"

Text: Isaiah 11:1-10

Quoting the Prophet Isaiah, Paul writes: ***"The root of Jesse will come, even he who arises to rule the Gentiles; in him will the Gentiles hope."*** ¹³ ¶ ***May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.*** (Romans 15:12-13)

Dear Fellow Christians:

I was living in my parents' basement on the campus of Immanuel College where I was going to school and I was awakened – by what I know not – in the middle of the night. Something, perhaps some sixth sense, told me that I was not alone. Faint moonlight filtered in through the window and gave the room an eerie glow... and revealed that I was, in fact, not alone. There was a man in my room, standing silently. Watching me. I remember struggling to keep my breathing regular to give him the impression that I was still asleep. Breathe in, breathe out. Think. I knew instantly that this was no friend or family member. The man had long, wild hair sticking out at all angles, some hanging down past his shoulders. I knew no one with such hair. The man was obviously a stranger – an intruder – who could not possibly be there for any good reason. His arms, I could faintly make out, hung limply at his sides. In vain I struggled to convince myself that this was not real; that all was a dream or some silly mistake. I was seeing things, imagining things.

And then the man moved – just slightly – forwards and then backwards, forwards and backwards, as if he were swaying to some music that only he could hear.

I had to *do*...something. I had to act. In my rising panic I formulated a desperate plan. I would spring suddenly from my bed, tackle the man as hard as I possibly could, and yell to my dad upstairs for help. There was no other way. Faster than I've ever moved in my life I sprang from the bed and launched myself at the intruder, striking him directly in the sternum – even as I loosed a mighty battle cry that doubled as a call to my dad for help.

To be fair, it wasn't me that had hung the potted fern from the heat vent in the ceiling of my room. My mom had done that. But shortly after impact I did remember hanging my suit coat from the bottom of it. The

movement, I later realized, was the result of the furnace kicking in and gently blowing the whole hanging mass back and forth. I wasn't sure, by the way, if I should be relieved or alarmed that my dad never even heard my war cry. On the one hand, had it been real, I could have been in trouble, but, on the other hand, as it was I had no problem subduing an empty suit and a potted fern, all on my own..

No doubt the seed for my failure to distinguish between a potted fern and a demented prowler was sown by some scary movie with which I had tormented myself – before I swore them off forever. Now I won't watch them, and quite honestly I don't really understand their appeal. That stuff sticks with you; it causes you to fear what is almost never real. And the key there is "almost" – *almost* never real.

What about you? Do such wild thoughts ever frighten, even terrify you? A man, in the dark, with an ax, watching? Not really, right? Everyone knows that sort of thing almost never happens. Almost. But now ask the question a little differently. What about God, watching, with an ax. Strange question, but do you find that to be a terrifying thought. Many in our day should. Keep this thought in the back of your mind as you read our text for this morning, found in the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, the 11th Chapter:

ESV ***Isaiah 11:1-10*** ***There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit. ² And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. ³ And his delight shall be in the fear of the LORD. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide disputes by what his ears hear, ⁴ but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; and he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. ⁵ Righteousness shall be the belt of his waist, and faithfulness the belt of his loins. ⁶ The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together; and a little child shall lead them. ⁷ The cow and the bear shall graze; their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. ⁸ The nursing child shall play over the hole of the cobra, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den. ⁹ They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea. ¹⁰ ¶ In that day the root of Jesse, who shall stand***

as a signal for the peoples--of him shall the nations inquire, and his resting place shall be glorious.

So far the verbally inspired words of the Creator of all that exists. Pause for a moment and try to grasp the profound importance of such words, praying that the God who provided them for your study and meditation this morning would also grant to you the wisdom, strength, comfort and guidance that such truths can provide. To this end we pray: ***“Sanctify us by Your truth, O Lord. Your word is truth.”*** Amen.

This text from the Prophet Isaiah is actually extraordinarily peaceful and serene, isn't it? Uplifting and comforting. In fact it is just about the farthest thing from our introduction possible. Or is it?

Most human beings like to think in terms of happily ever after. Most believe that most people are basically good. Never in my life have I met someone who actually believed he or she was wicked enough to be eternally condemned by a righteous God. No matter how faithless the life and no matter how wicked the lifestyle, human beings tend to think of themselves as "pretty good people," as souls fully deserving of God's heaven.

But take another, closer look at our text. Before there was the joy and renewal, there had to have been great sadness. Before there was the new green growth, there was the stump – and that means that the stump had, by definition, once been a living plant. Something had to cut it down, and that something was God, with his ax. Our text identifies what exactly that "ax" is. Did you catch it? It is, of course, his Word. By his Word God both creates and destroys. From our text: ***"He shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked."***

In the analogy of our text, the stump had once been Israel – God's own special living tree. Once that tree had indeed thrived – magnificently so. God made the tree to live. It was not made to die. In fact God would have liked nothing more than to see the tree continue to live and grow and flourish. His desire was that the tree would continue to provide shelter and comfort for all who flocked to its shade – as in the days of King David and his son, Solomon. God wanted all the world to come to know the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The God of promise.

So with infinite patience God watered that tree with his Word. He sent his prophets to prune its branches and to warn against continued neglect. Time after time the Lord looked for the fruits of faith from his

precious, chosen tree – and with few exceptions found none. Year after year the rot, the decay, spread, and when no hope was left for it, God laid his ax to its base. How his heart must have broken, humanly speaking, to see the fall of his chosen race and people. How it must have pained him to have to simply chop off that which had received so much of his patience, love and attention.

But cut off Israel he did, and that is absolutely a message that our own old Adam needs to hear. It is, in fact, a divine truth that the sinful flesh of *all mankind* desperately needs to comprehend. God's patience dare never be confused with God's favor or approval. Sin has that power, doesn't it – the power to change how we regard sin? Think of it. Sin just once, and your conscience screams its condemnation. Sin again, and your conscience objects, but just a bit less vehemently. Continue in that sin and the conscience is finally reduced to a pathetic, barely audible whimper, and that which once caused great guilt no longer matters. Its very familiarity makes it seem much more acceptable. That's how sin eventually destroys saving faith. That's what brings God's ax.

Now shift the "man in the dark scenario" just a bit, and note well the dramatic result. This time, the man you see in the dark is not some demented enemy but your most powerful friend and ally – the strongest, most capable person you know who also happens to love you more than life itself. Suddenly the very same sight that had just moments earlier filled you with such terror, now fills your heart with comfort and assurance. All because you suddenly realize that that powerful, fearsome force *is now on your side*. He's not there to harm, he's there to protect. He is fighting *for* you, not against you. Now that fierce weapon in his hand doesn't terrorize, it comforts and encourages.

That's exactly what happened in connection with our relationship with our God. Where once the thought of God watching us and seeing all that we think and do would have filled us with fear, now that same thought brings comfort and peace.

How did such a change come about? How *could* such a change come about? The answer is the great mystery of the gospel, for God turned against his own Son – knowing full well that his Son had never done anything wrong. All of the terrible things that we clearly deserved were instead done to Jesus.

It was as if God himself, after having laid his ax to the base of the tree of Israel, took that ax to what was left, hewed out two rough wooden beams, fastened them together, and then hung his own Son upon it.

Israel had been condemned because of their unbelief and resulting sin, but that precious root, spoken of in our text, remained. From that root came new growth, and from that new growth came the Savior of all mankind. Even as he laid the ax to the rotten tree, God preserved his promise and acted in great love for all mankind.

All of this was necessary because of sin – *our* sin. Before the things described in our text could become a reality; that is, before ***"the wolf could dwell with the lamb, and the leopard lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together; and a little child lead them"*** before that could happen the root cause of the problem – sin – had to be removed. That is exactly what God sent his Son to do. That is exactly why God not only laid his ax to the tree of Israel, but why he also preserved its root, and caused that new growth.

Some read the words of our text and think it describes some sort of physical utopia here on earth. It is rather a condition of the heart – the heart where the Holy Spirit himself has taken up residence. Others hear those words as absurd and impossible. How can a bear graze or a lion eat straw? Indeed, something would have to be different than it is now, wouldn't it? Some dramatic change will have to have taken place. This is, in fact, God's image of the dramatic change that he himself brought about when he sent his Son to satisfy our sin payment. This is God's image of the change that God the Holy Spirit brings to every single heart that he calls to faith in the simple truth of sins forgiven for Jesus' sake. You and I were the beasts, wholly unfit and ill-suited to a peaceful existence. But God changed us.

The world will always believe that man can bring about such dramatic change himself. Though never in recorded history has he been able to do so, the dream remains. Man's dream is, in reality, a nightmare. God waits, patiently. One thing and one thing only appeases his divine wrath: faith in Jesus Christ. All who trust that every bit of goodness necessary for us to enter heaven has already been earned or supplied by Jesus Christ, will be saved. God watches over you who trust in him as your protector and defender. He watches in love; never in anger. On the other hand, all who reject Jesus Christ by imagining that they can, do, or must earn their own passage by their own good works – all such will die eternally. Those God does not watch as a friend, ally, protector. Those

tragically misguided souls should be afraid. Very, very afraid. God is the one enemy no one can afford to have.

Thanks be to God that the happy conditions described in our text are already ours through faith in Jesus Christ. God himself has given us this peace and joy *in Jesus Christ*. Unlike before, now we are not terrified by the One who watches. He is, in fact, our best possible friend and our heart's true delight. He is the very one who has declared us to be guiltless in his sight – because of what his Son has done in and for us. Amen.

Scripture Readings

ESV **Romans 15:4-13** For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. ⁵ May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, ⁶ that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁷ ¶ Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. ⁸ For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God's truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, ⁹ and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written, "Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles, and sing to your name." ¹⁰ And again it is said, "Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people." ¹¹ And again, "Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples extol him." ¹² And again Isaiah says, "The root of Jesse will come, even he who arises to rule the Gentiles; in him will the Gentiles hope." ¹³ ¶ May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.

ESV **Matthew 3:1-12** In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, ² "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." ³ For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.'" ⁴ Now John wore a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. ⁵ Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him, ⁶ and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁷ ¶ But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸ Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. ⁹ And do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father,' for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham." ¹⁰ Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ¹¹ ¶ "I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹² His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

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The Second Sunday in Advent – December 8, 2019

The Opening Prayer by the Pastor

The Opening Hymn – 66 (Red Hymnal)

"Hark the Glad Sound! The Savior Comes"

The Order of Service – Supplement page 12ff. (Brown Hymnal)

The Scripture Lessons: (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

The First Lesson: (Romans 15:4-13) Throughout the New Testament it is made plain to us that Jesus died to pay not just for the sins of some (like the Jews) but for the sum total of the sins of the entire world. All are invited to the "wedding feast" of the Lamb of God. The Bible also stresses unity of faith and doctrine in all that we teach and believe. Our infallible guide, as always, is the Holy Word of God.

The Psalm of the Day – Psalm 24 (Page 25) (Brown Hymnal)

The Second Lesson: (Matthew 3:1-12) Look with the eyes, but see with faith. John the Baptist was an unimposing sight, but his words carried great power – because they were the words of God. So also God is not impressed with outward actions – which often hide inner unbelief. He looks for faith in the heart – which will naturally produce fruits of faith. This was the message of John the Baptist as he prepared the people for the coming of Jesus Christ.

The Confession of Faith -

The Nicene Creed – page 5. (Brown Hymnal)

The Pre-Sermon Hymn – 784 (Brown Hymnal)

"Lord Take My Hand and Lead Me"

The Sermon – Text: Isaiah 11:1-10 (See back page of this bulletin)

"God's Ax"

The Offertory – (Supplement page 16 insert)

The Pre-communion Hymn – 317 (Stanzas 1-3) (Red Hymnal)

"Alas My God My Sins Are Great"

The Preparation for Holy Communion (Brown Hymnal page 17)

The Distribution

The Nunc Dimittis and Thanksgiving (Brown Hymnal page 20)

The Benediction

The Closing Hymn – 528 (Stanzas 1-2, 6) (Red Hymnal)

"If God Himself Be for Me"

Silent Prayer

Welcome! - We warmly welcome any visitors worshipping with us this morning and invite you to join us each Sunday at this time. We are glad you are here!
To our Visitors seeking Holy Communion – In obedience to God's Word, we practice "Close Communion." This practice stresses both our concern for others, not wanting anyone to receive the sacrament to their harm (1 Cor. 11:27-30) and the importance of unity in confession and faith (1 Cor. 10:16-17). For this reason we ask that anyone who has not established this unity through membership in a CLC congregation please meet with the pastor to discuss this Scriptural doctrine before communing. This is a practice that we follow out of love and concern for you, and out of obedience to God's Word, not in judgment of anyone's Christian faith.

Attendance – Sunday (22) Average (40) Wednesday (18)

This Week at St. Paul:

Today	-9:00 a.m.	– Sunday School and Bible Class
	-10:00 a.m.	– Worship Service w/communion
	-11:15 a.m.	– Fellowship and coffee time
	-11:30 a.m.	– Church Council Meeting
Wednesday	-5:45 p.m.	– Confirmation Class
	-7:00 p.m.	– Mid-Week Advent Service
Next Sunday	-9:00 a.m.	– Sunday School and Bible Class
	-10:00 a.m.	– Worship Service
	-11:00 a.m.	– Fellowship and coffee time

CLC News – Pastor Norman Greve has returned the calls to Bowdle and Ipswich. Berea of Sioux Falls has called Pastor James Albrecht. Pastor John Hein was called to the faculty of Immanuel Lutheran College.

Christmas Party – Thanks to those who planned and prepared yesterday's Church Christmas Party. Great fun, as always - although the thematic color scheme was rather depressing.

Church Council Meeting – The Church Council is scheduled to meet this morning during the fellowship hour. This is the final meeting in preparation for the upcoming Annual Meeting and prior to year's end. Be sure, as always, to bring agenda items to the attention of a Council member.

Annual Voters and Women's Fellowship Meetings – The voters are scheduled to conduct the Annual Meeting two weeks from today. The Women's fellowship is also scheduled to meet, and all are invited to the fellowship meal immediately after the Sunday service. Timothy Meyer has applied for voting membership at St Paul.