Isaiah 11:1-10

*The Spirit of Christmas* (Part 3 – Vision of a Different World)

I want you all to try something for me. I’d like to invite you to daydream … didn’t expect *that* from a preacher, did you!? … Okay, *not the usual kind of daydreaming obviously, or I’ll lose you before the sermon even begins …* just a little *focused* daydreaming… Daydream about what you hope Christmas will be like this year … What kind of day do you want to have? … More than that, what kind of relationships do you want to be a part of? **[LONG PAUSE]** …

Even more …what kind of world do you want to live in this Christmas and beyond? … Our hopes, after all, surely aren’t limited to our immediate wants and needs … but reach out to include our larger families, communities and the world. With regard to the kind of world in which we want to live, Isaiah is a uniquely helpful voice … throughout the latter half of his book, we read about a world where swords are beaten into plowshares … dry deserts bloom … animals on opposite sides of the food chain dwell together in peace … and death is swallowed up forever.

With the picture of your Christmas game-plan in mind, review your “to-do” list and think how many of your goals contribute directly to your deep longings about the world … There may be many things on our lists that are important in the short run, but don’t contribute to the larger vision. Advent is a time to put things in perspective, to channel our energy and resources to those things that matter most … to us, to our families and communities, and to God.

Today we finish our “Spirit of Christmas Past” series – remembering how we used to celebrate Christmas generations ago, and trying to reclaim certain parts of it again. The first week we focused on family celebration, last week we expanded the idea of goodwill toward others in society … and today we round out the series by showing how Christmas reveals a ***vision of a different world***!

Perhaps no Old Testament prophet could see this world better than Isaiah; listen to what he says – this is Isa. 11 taken from *The Message*: “God’s green shoot … won’t judge by appearances” – *(have you noticed what our culture values, how it determines worth? I’m sorry, but it’s by appearances)* … Isa. Continues, “God’s righteous branch will judge the needy by what is right” - *(whereas in our world it’s the wealthy, the* un-*needy that get the favorable judgments)* – but this new world isn’t just different in terms of economics and the judicial system – *everything* is changed … “The wolf will romp with the lamb, the leopard sleep with the kid. Calf and lion will eat from the same trough, and a little child will lead them … The whole earth will be brimming with knowing God-Alive, a living knowledge of God ocean-deep, ocean-wide.”

That’s DIFFERENT! In fact, I can understand if rational people think this vision passes all bounds of probability. To our minds, *at least a part of our minds*, it seems unrealistic. But if we believe Christ is God’s Son, that he spoke the truth … if we hear his teaching, he looks forward to *just such* an “upside down world” – blessed are the poor … blessed are those who mourn … blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth. Both the prophet, and the one of whom he foretold, call us to raise our sight above our earth-bound materialism – our worrying about a higher standard of living, social security, pensions, medical plans, retirement, long-term care. Neither the prophet nor the Messiah believes that to “seek first the kingdom of God,” the kingdom of right relationships, will result in these … “blessings.”

To be sure, the implications of Christ’s gospel certainly involve a reorganization of life, and that does include “practical” affairs like finances and time-management … but it’s a reorganization that declares that *until the spirit of the person themselves is changed*, no shifting of the scenery will avail for human need.

And I think that’s *exactly* the point Charles Dickens tries to make with his character, Ebenezer Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol*. We’ve quoted from that great work over the last two weeks, with the Ghost of Christmas Past and the Ghost of Christmas Present … well, *clearly* we can’t end the series without a reference to the final messenger, who changed Scrooge’s vision, and as a result, his world.

"Ghost of the Future!" Scrooge exclaimed, "I fear you more than any specter I have seen. But as I know your purpose is to do me good, and as I hope to live to be another man from what I was, I am prepared to bear you company, and do it with a thankful heart. Lead on," said Scrooge. "Lead on.” *[And after the spirit had shown Scrooge many glimpses and fragments concerning an anonymous man’s death he was brought to a cemetery…]* The Spirit stood among the graves, and pointed down to one. Scrooge advanced towards it trembling … "Before I draw nearer to that stone to which you point," said Scrooge," answer me one question. Are these the shadows of the things that *Will* be, or are they shadows of things that *May* be, only?" … Still the Ghost pointed downward to the grave by which it stood … immovable as ever, as Ebenezer beheld his own name in horror …

"Spirit!" he cried, tight clutching at its robe, "Hear me. I am not the man I was. I will not be the man I must have been but for this intercourse. Why show me this, if I am past all hope? Good Spirit," he pursued, as down upon the ground he fell before it: "Your nature intercedes for me, and pities me. Assure me that I yet may change these shadows you have shown me, by an altered life."

The kind hand of the phantom trembled as Scrooge exclaimed, "I will honor Christmas in my heart, and try to keep it *all* the year. I will live in the Past, the Present, and the Future. The Spirits of all Three shall strive within me. I will not shut out the lessons that they teach. Oh, tell me I may sponge away the writing on this stone!" Holding up his hands in a last prayer to have his fate aye reversed, he saw an alteration in the Phantom's hood and dress. It shrunk, collapsed, and dwindled down into a bedpost.

Yes! And the bedpost was his own.  The bed was his own, the room was his own.  Best and happiest of all, the Time before him was his own, to make amends in! Scrooge scrambled out of bed.  "The Spirits of all Three shall strive within me.  Oh Heaven be praised for this.  I say it on my knees, old Jacob, on my knees!" He was so fluttered and so glowing with his good intentions, that his broken voice would scarcely answer to his call.  He had been sobbing violently in his conflict with the Spirit, and his face was wet with tears. His hands were busy with his garments all this time; turning them inside out, putting them on upside down, tearing them, mislaying them, making them parties to every kind of extravagance.

"I don't know what to do!" cried Scrooge, laughing and crying in the same breath: "I am as light as a feather, I am as happy as an angel, I am as merry as a schoolboy.  I am as giddy as a drunken man.  A merry Christmas to everybody - to all the world! Really, for a man who had been out of practice for so many years, it was a splendid laugh, a most illustrious laugh.  The father of a long, long line of brilliant laughs.”

Some would tell Scrooge it was just a dream … we often discount the worth of dreams upon waking … but I’m certainly glad Ebenezer didn’t … Our *first* Scripture reading (Psalm 126) expresses the power of dreams – “When the LORD brought back Zion from captivity, we were like those who dream.” I think the Psalmist cherished the intense sensation of reality that accompanies dreams. It’s this quality that not only makes people fear bad dreams, but ALSO makes people reluctant to come fully awake, if they are enjoying a pleasant dream. In either case, it’s not just the pleasantness of the dream, or the scariness of a dream that either entices or repels us – it’s the fact that the dream always feels *more real than real*. 

That is how the Jewish exiles felt when the Gentile King who held them captive decreed that they could return to Israel and to Jerusalem. Yes, it was real, but it was so good, that it made you feel that it was a dream … I believe that’s how Isaiah felt when the Spirit prophesied through him … I imagine it’s how Mary felt when the angel told her she’d have a son, and again how she felt as she finally held in her arms that holy child.

There’s a song by Trans-Siberian Orchestra that connects these ideas of dreams and a vision of a different world – it’s called, “The World that He Sees” and part of the lyrics go like this:

There was a cold winter night, where the dark went on forever And the world seemed like a dream gone astray. And somehow on this night as the world huddled together There a child slept at the end of the day. And he dreamed of another world.

What is the dream of this night; why does it echo forever  
Here in the cold at the end of this year?  
And with all our different lives, why do we dream it together  
When at the first sign of snow it appears?  
  
And he dreamed of another world, in another time, and another place  
Where no man has to wear a sign, saying where he's from, saying what's his race  
And he wants us to believe, this world that he sees.

Jesus wasn’t the first one to have that dream, as Isaiah and the Psalmist show, but he was the one who put flesh on the dream – I think of the words in the Gospel of John, just slightly changed – and the “*dream* became flesh” and it dwelt among us, full of grace and truth. There were others in the line of dreamers, as Ps. 126 says, “those who dream” – Elizabeth & Zachariah, then Joseph, the Magi, Anna & Simeon in the Temple when Jesus was presented as a baby … and of course John the Baptist. 

“When the Lord brought back Zion from captivity, we were like those who dream. Our mouth was *filled with laughter*, our tongue with shouts of joy.” As Dickens writes of Scrooge in the end, “It was a splendid laugh … the father of a long, *long line* of laughs” …

Just as Mary and Joseph longed for the birth of their baby, we long for the return of our King – and that changes our worldview – we live with the vision of a very different world. Not unlike Scrooge, Joseph and Mary were filled with a radical sort of hope which is only known by those who have chosen to trust full in God and as a consequence live out drastically bold lives in the name of God.  What I have been talking about this morning is not limited to social change, political agendas, or any other program of human schemes. What I am talking about is living a life of radical Christ-Like audacity.    
 Think of it this way, as Isaiah and the Psalmist looked forward to the coming of God’s Kingdom, one that would be like a desert exploding into bloom, so too do Christians at the season of Advent look forward to the second advent, when Jesus shall make all things new. And the vision of that second advent is meant to inspire us NOW to not only believe in that different world, but bring it to flower in reality.

The mention of the lamb and wolf dwelling together, or the lion eating grass like an ox – surely this has a dream-like quality about it, wouldn’t you say? Some teachers have supposed that these images are simply metaphors for peace and tranquility. I don’t think so, any more than I think John’s visions of the New Jerusalem in the book of Revelation are fanciful. Amazing images, to be sure! But why do we suppose that the God who has made all that we see cannot do as he says? What is more real? What is more likely? What God does at the beginning? Or what he reserves for the end?   
And, meanwhile, here we are, between these two advents – the one where God first came into the world as a human being, and the one where that human being, Jesus Christ, will return to the earth to complete his work of redemption, to finally and completely save those who belong to him, to judge those who do not, and to inaugurate the kingdom foreseen by Isaiah and the Psalmist and by other Old Testament Prophets and New Testament Apostles. Here we are in the middle of the advents.

As you complete your days of Advent, as you prepare yourself to celebrate our Lord’s first entrance into this world, go ahead and indulge yourself in the joy of one who thinks that God-with-us is *so* wonderful, that it’s like a dream come true. It *is* a dream come true. And, as we live waiting for when Jesus returns and sets up his everlasting kingdom, while we live between these two dreams, let us fortify ourselves with hope … so we may sow the seeds that will bring forth a different world … We know that God kept all his promises concerning the first advent. He will most certainly keep all his promises concerning the second advent. If your dream is God’s dream … may all your dreams come true. Amen. 