

Spring Lake Presbyterian Church**Pastor: Rev. Kathryn M. Treadway****December 9, 2007**

Matthew 3:1-12 *In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming,* ²*“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”* ³*This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’”* ⁴*Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey.* ⁵*Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan,* ⁶*and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.*

⁷*But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?”* ⁸*Bear fruit worthy of repentance.* ⁹*Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.* ¹⁰*Even now the ax is lying at 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 one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. 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 will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”*

Isaiah 11:1-10 *A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.* ²*The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.* ³*His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear;* ⁴*but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; 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 around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins.* ⁶*The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling 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 asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder’s*

den. ⁹They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.

¹⁰On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious.

Advent 2

I looked out my window and there it was, this gorgeous bird of prey perching pristinely upon my chain-link fence. I stared, wonder-filled, at this awe of creation, calling the kids to come be amazed with me. Then I ran to get my “Birds of Florida” book and we identified it as a **Red Shouldered Hawk**. We smiled as it swiveled its head more than 180 degrees without flinching another muscle. We watched in wonder at this creature, typically hidden from view but now in plain view for us to observe in its natural habitat.

The Christmas story, with that hallowed nativity scene we’ve come to expect, began with a wonder foretold. More wonderful than a hawk perched outside my window, the story of God’s reconciliation of the world began with a prophecy. Long before the echoes of “no room” reached the ears of a traveling couple, long before the shepherd’s silence was broken by a glorious radiance of the heavenly host praising God, long before the dazzling star led a group of magi from the East, there was the waiting . . . and the watching. There was the preparing.

Isaiah reminds the people of what is to come – a great judge will come – one who will decide fairly, despite what his eyes may see. He will judge with righteousness so that the meek and the poor, all those who have been “left out” in the past, will be made whole. Imagine the world Isaiah describes, where ⁶*The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. ⁷The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. ⁸The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder’s den. ⁹They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.* The world Isaiah describes is not natural! It goes against the innate creature-understanding – against the need to eat, against the need to protect. When the great Judge comes, Isaiah says, fear will dissipate and all will equally be neighbors. When the great Judge comes, Isaiah says, hunger and safety will no longer dictate behavior. When the great Judge comes, the knowledge of the Lord will inhabit the earth in such a way as to make peace among those innately driven to keep enemies. And because of this wonder, when the great Judge comes, we don’t want to miss it perched outside the windows of our lives, perched for us all to see.

And so John the Baptist, hearing from God that this ultimate Judge is coming, sends out the message: Prepare ye the way of the Lord! Make straight in the desert a highway for our God! And how do we prepare? Repent! Everyone of you, and be baptized! Enter

into the mysterious call of this water and be willing to live counter-intuitively. Be willing to live as Isaiah foretold – without being motivated by hunger or security. Live, rather, in such a way that prepares the way for Right-ness to motivate and change us. Prepare ye the way of the Lord! – that topsy-turvy upside down way that makes no logical sense, no financial sense, no protective sense. Prepare the way for God to turn our world upside down.

At the heart of our preparing is John the Baptist's cry – Go forth and bear fruit to the world! When the Jewish Sadducees and Pharisees came for baptism, he gave them no respect, he called them names! You brood of vipers! You can bet that didn't sit well with them. But he did so to point out that it isn't enough to be from the right family or to hold a specific position in the religious community. God can change the established way of things, making room for different families to share in the inheritance. And so, we believe, the birth of Christ began a change that is still taking place, as we, who were not born of one of the twelve sons of Jacob, who are not tied physically to the origins of Israel, are grafted in to the vine of Jesse. There are no race requirements to enter into the glorious meshing of the lamb's world with the wolf's world. There are no church attendance or cleanliness ritual requirements to witness the cow and the bear grazing together. There is simply the call to "bear fruit worthy of repentance" as John the Baptist stated.

Repentance is more than an "I'm sorry." It is a complete turning around from one way of *acting*, from one way of *thinking* so that the Lord of All can be born into our hearts.

Have you seen any signs of the One Who Is To Come being born into our world? I don't mean signs like wars and rumors of war that have always and will always signal the end of times. Rather, have you seen the Christ child, the Son of God, bearing hope to our world?

Advent is a time of waiting for the light to be born into our darkness, while secretly knowing that the light is already here. Because we live in a world post-Bethlehem, we are privy to both places of hope – to that place that waits for the divine revelation to be born into our world and also to that place of knowledge that God's incarnate presence is still with us. No matter how dark, the light still shines. Like a couple, waiting for a baby to be born 2 weeks AFTER its due date, we ask, How long O Lord? And we sing, O come, O Come Emmanuel and ransom us, ransom captive Israel that *mourns* in lonely exile! We seek. We wait.

I am notorious for losing things – particularly my keys. With 5 minutes to spare, I head out to the car only to discover that my keys are not where I believed them to be. I retrace my steps to no avail, wanting to give up, but realizing the import of my having transportation. And so I continue seeking – searching on desks, behind doors, on shelves, beneath papers, only to discover them sitting in plain view on my kitchen counter.

The coming of Christ into this world is much the same – he comes in plain view if we will but just look. Like the sighting of the wild hawk on my fence post, the Christ child is born into our lives everyday. But will we see? Or will he remain hidden. Do we

expect him to be born in a bigger place than Spring Lake? In a more extravagant place than Spring Lake Presbyterian Church? Do we expect him to be born among those who are younger than we are? Or in those whose lives are just a tad more exciting? Jesus was born in a stable! In Bethlehem! Among strangers! And his birth was proclaimed to the simpletons who were called shepherds. There was no luxurious temple to which he was to be born. He was born in REAL life, among the ordinariness, the loneliness, the outcasts – he was born to us, right where we left off in our lives.

I have been taking a spiritual inventory of my life, examining who God is calling me to be while also examining the way I have chosen to live. I am remembering that my baptism marked the start of a lifelong process of transformation into God's image, into God's child. But I'm discovering that I have not been transformed "enough," that conversion is lifelong and that I get impatient with myself and with others when we do not "get" that the Hope of the world, God-With-Us, is already here, is already enough, is already complete. I'm finding that I'm quite impatient – and my life motto is simply "hurry up!" But Advent is not about rushing to find the One who is coming. Advent is not the hurry scurry of last minute shopping sprees or of fitting in as many parties as possible before December 25 rolls around. Advent is rather a time of waiting and watching, something people with my personality motto ("Hurry Up!") don't do very easily. But if I hurry, looking only in the most important places, I might miss the light that is promised to break into my darkness. – into your darkness. I might miss the light that is born in simplicity, that is present in the ordinariness of life. I might miss the wonder, the awe, of a tender smile upon a loved one's face. I might miss the joy of a hot meal prepared for my family. I might miss the wonder of health or the blessing of love or the peace of contentment that is being birthed into my ordinariness.

Prepare the Way of the Lord – make straight in the desert a highway for our God! We live in the desert where the face of God is not always observed, but God has been born among us – just look. Look on fenceposts. Look on kitchen counters. Look in the familiar faces that you have memorized and forget to "see." Look in your heart where the fruit of true repentance yearns to be born. And be amazed at what you may see.

I leave you with a modern paraphrase of Isaiah's prophecy written by a friend of mine.

*"The donkey shall live with the elephant,
the corporate CEO shall share a home with the welfare mom,
the Muslim and the Jew and the Christian shall lie down together,
and a poor Palestinian child,
born out of wedlock to a teenage mother, shall lead them.
The vegetarian and the hunter shall share a meal,
black and white children will play together,
and the poor shall feast like the rich.
A refugee child in Darfur shall play near the headquarters of the Janjaweed,
and a toddler in Iraq shall put its hand on an IED which will never explode.
They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain;
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord*

*as the waters cover the sea.
On that day God's faithful people will stand as a sign to the world,
all people will want to join their ranks,
and the Church shall be a glorious symbol of peace and love.
Amen."*¹

¹ Modern Paraphrase by Rev. Ellen Johnson, 2007. Edited by Katie Treadway for use in her congregation.