

THE THREE PHASES OF PROPHECY

Preached at Woodlawn Chapel Presbyterian Church
December 4, 2022, the Second Sunday in Advent
Isaiah 11: 1-9; Matthew 3:1-12; Romans 15:4-13

Let us pray:

Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hidden: cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may love you more completely, and worthily magnify thy holy name; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

We are used to Advent being a time of expectancy and anticipation of the birth of Jesus, as Rev. Mark has been and will be talking about in Adult Ed after services. What is less often emphasized is Advent as a time for pondering the meaning of the miracle and mystery of the Incarnation. We are used to thinking of Jesus in the Gospel stories as a human being, a man. But ever since the Nicene Creed was formulated in 325 AD, the Church has always maintained that Jesus was both fully human AND fully divine.

A common theme of all three scriptures for this Second Sunday in Advent is that of prophecy: prophecy of the Incarnation. And it is Prophecy in three phases: past, present, and future. In other words: Hope, Fulfillment, and Unfolding.

We begin with the prophecy from the past, that of hope for the future. Isaiah is prophesying about the future King of Israel. Jews from Isaiah's time and up until the time of Jesus would have understood this passage to be a prophecy of the return of the Davidic line of kings: David, and Solomon of the United Israel and then the 18 Kings of Judah, after the kingdom split in two.

Isaiah sees the return of the Davidic King as a complete transformation of reality, both in humanity's socio-political order and in the order of the creatures of the natural world - the animals.

In the socio-political order, the human world, the king will be a fair and just judge, with great insight, siding with the poor and marginalized, and punishing the wealthy wicked who oppress them. In other words it would be a complete reversal of the state of affairs of Isaiah's day.

In the natural world, the reversal will be even more complete. There will be no predators. There will be no prey. Both will be equal and at peace with each other. It's a post-Apocalyptic vision of reality, the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth.

Remember what Chris said several weeks ago. Over the past century, the word apocalypse has come to mean a disaster or the end of the world, as in the movies or science fiction. But Apocalypse in its original form and translation meant Revelation, to reveal.

No one from Isaiah's forward would have understood this passage to be a prophecy of the coming of the Messiah. They would have only understood it as a prophecy of a return to the good old days of David and Solomon.

I have no way of knowing this but I would be willing to wager that within two years of the Resurrection, maybe even less, the Apostles and their followers would be re-interpreting this passage as a prophecy of the Incarnation or perhaps even the Second Coming of the Messiah. They might have even seen it as a prelude to the four Suffering Servant Songs in Second Isaiah. But either way it would have been a prophecy of Hope for the future.

Like the passage from Isaiah, Mathew's description of John the Baptist and his baptizing of Jesus is so familiar to us that we really don't think about it much. We just enjoy it. But it really is much more radical and prophetic than we realize.

First of all, baptism was unheard of in the Jewish culture of that time. Yes, they had the mikveh, the ritual immersion bath. But that ritual bath was to wash away a state of uncleanness, such as sexuality, so that one could participate in religious worship or celebration. And being ritually unclean is very different than being sinful or having committed a sin.

Second, John the Baptist is a very different prophet than the Old Testament prophets. They called for repentance, true. But John offers a sacrament of repentance: baptism. The baptisms John is performing are very different than the Reformed baptism we practice, and it's not just that we don't immerse. John's call was for persons to examine their lives, to see what they needed to change in order to become a better person, and then to do that, to change the way they lived. And that made it essentially different from confession, absolution, and forgiveness, in the Anglican or Catholic sense. John's baptism is a sacrament of repentance "once in a lifetime and for all time".

And it has eschatological implications. John isn't prophesying the coming of the Kingdom of God in the future. John is saying "It's here, now, right now, in the present. The Kingdom of God is at hand. The Final Judgement is here. And this sacrament of baptism will protect you from the flames of damnation that come with the Final Judgement." This is the present tense of prophecy: fulfillment in the present.

John knows that the Incarnation has already happened, that God walks the earth as a human being. John's only mistake, which he is about to have corrected, is that this Incarnation is not one of royal kingship and Final Judgement, but instead one of humility and service, one of humanity, The Final Judgement will have to wait for the Second Coming.

So when Jesus comes to John the Baptist to be baptized, John says, "No, man, you've got it backwards. I should be coming to you." I'm paraphrasing, of course

There is a mis-translation in the text of Matthew that we read for today. The Pharisees and Sadducees are not coming to **be baptized** by John. They are coming to **WATCH** John baptize others. John is a new player, a prophet, and possibly their enemy. They are the priests of the Temple of Jerusalem, the Holy of Holies. Forgiveness can only be received there. Yet here is John, baptizing people out in the wilderness, far away from Jerusalem.

And the Sadducees and Pharisees are about to get the shock of their lives: an apocalypse, a revelation. When John baptizes Jesus, the spirit of Yahweh descends over Jesus in the form of a Dove, and the voice of God says, "This is my Beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." Unfortunately we don't get to hear about the shock and awe that hits the Pharisees and Sadducees when they hear God's voice.

Moving on to the passage from Paul's letter to the Romans, this is the third phase of the Prophecy, the Phase of the Unfolding of the Incarnation in the future. Paul is telling the Romans that the miracle of the Incarnation and Resurrection makes unity and peace among all persons possible, Peace and unity even among Gentiles, Christians, and Jews. It is as if the peace among the animals in Isaiah has been made possible among human beings.

Today it would be oxymoronic to talk about any kind of unity in our highly divisive and polarized world, whether that be political or religious. In the political world, both of our country's two political parties have fractured into multiple branches. On one side we have the far right, the alt right, Christian nationalists, Trumpers, centrists and moderates. And on the other side, the Democrats are just as fractured as well.

And the religious world is similarly divided into multiple factions. There are five major religions in the world, eleven major branches of Christianity alone. There are two hundred denominations in the Protestant group, one thousand two hundred Christian denominations In the US, and forty-five thousand Christian denominations globally.

And yet unity is exactly what Paul is talking about. This passage from Romans is one I call The Impossible Dream. It's hard for us to keep in mind that in the Roman world and in the Jewish world, there is no separation of church and state. The state IS the church and the church IS the state.

This is the Future Phase of the Prophecy of the Incarnation. Paul is talking about the unfolding of the Incarnation - being made real - Peace as a reality. The Hope announced in Isaiah, which becomes the fulfillment of the Kingdom of God for John the Baptist in Matthew, now becomes the joyful acknowledgement in Paul that, in Christ, Peace has become a reality.

Paul's message here is aimed at "The Strong" in faith. In the first verse of this chapter, he says, "We who are strong should put up with the failings of the weak," not cast them out of the church as sinners, but help strengthen them and build them up. This way leads away from division and towards unity.

Paul's point is that, yes, there are things that divide us. But we should lift our vision up beyond these things to focus on what it is that unites us and makes us one: our belief that God came to us both as God and as a human being. He died and was resurrected so that our sins could be forgiven, so that we all might have eternal life.

So there are the three phases of the prophecy of the Incarnation: past, present, and future. The Hope of the past for the future, Fulfillment in the present, and the Unfolding of the reality in the future.

AMEN