

Isaiah 11:1-8

A shoot shall come out from the stock of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. 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.

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; 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.

Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins.

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.

The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.

The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.

Matthew 24:36-44

'But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son,* but only the Father. For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day* your Lord is coming. But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

“What Do You Expect From Christmas?”

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It's been cold. It's so cold. Tomatoes that we had in the enclosed patio area got frozen. Somebody left the window open. I think I did, and so we had to throw it all out. Did you hear about the couple in Sweetwater, Texas? Weather report: cold spell, frost warning, on TV, they were sitting there watching the news. He said, "Do you think we ought to bring the potted plants in?" And he did. A little green snake was hiding in one of the plants. When it warmed up, it slithered out and went under the sofa. She saw it. She screamed. He was in the shower. He came running, unclothed, got down on the floor to look for the snake. The dog put his cold nose on him as he was bent over. He thought that a snake had bitten him, and he passed out. She called 911. Thought he had a heart attack. Paramedics

came, put him on a stretcher. The snake then came out from under the sofa. The paramedics dropped the stretcher and he broke his arm, so he was hauled off to the hospital. But she still had a problem. So she called the neighbor. Came over with a newspaper rolled up, looking for the snake. She sat on the sofa, felt the snake wiggling in the cushion. She screamed and fainted. The neighbor then administered CPR. The neighbor's wife, who had been grocery shopping, came in just at that time. Witnessing the mouth-to-mouth procedure, and so she hit her husband in the head with a plastic bag filled with canned goods. The police were called. Everything was explained. The snake then crawled out from under the sofa. One of the cops pulled a gun, a revolver, and fired. Missed the snake, but hit a table, knocking it over. A lamp fell, sparks flew, caught the curtain on fire, then the wall. Fire truck came, raised its ladder too early, hit a power pole, knocked down the wires. Ten city blocks, no power or telephone lines. Twelve months later, the next year, the same couple, sitting late at night listening to the weather forecast calling for a cold snap. He said to her, "Do you think we ought to bring in the plants for the night?" She shot him dead.

I don't know if that's true. I told that story at the United Methodist Women's Tea several years ago, and I don't think they liked it. And I don't know if it's a true story, but it is a Christmas story. I think the reason they didn't like it was due to the fact that it was the wrong time of year. It's a Christmas story, and it's an Advent tale. And you and I are like the couple sitting on the sofa wondering if we ought to bring the potted plants in. We have no idea there's a snake in one of the plants, and we have no idea what's going to happen next. Advent is a time to wait, and prepare for Christmas, and one thing will lead to another, and we don't have a clue unless we get it together, what we want from Christmas. There are two things I want to say about that.

First of all, there is some question when Christmas will come to us. It doesn't always come. And if it comes, it doesn't always come when we think it should. When will Christmas come? When will it happen? Jesus told his listeners, it's one of the most important things he said to them. He said "The day of the Lord, nobody knows, not even the angels in Heaven know, and I don't know. Only God knows." Christmas this year will come. It may not be December 25th. It could be before that. Or it could be later. Certainly that first Christmas happened, the Christ child was born, Bethlehem didn't know about it. The Gospel writer Mark, Mark never knew it. Mark didn't say anything about Jesus' birth. The Gospel writer John, he didn't know about Jesus' birth, although he did say the Word became flesh and dwelled among us, and John did say that before the world was, the Word was. Maybe Christmas happened before Creation. Luke tells us about Christmas, and then Matthew. But that's fifty years after Jesus' death, and people talking about it, it took them fifty years before Christmas became Christmas. You never know when. You just never know when.

Last Sunday, Eugene Lowry preached, and we had Commitment Sunday, and it was a wonderful thing. He's a great preacher, and we went out to lunch afterwards. He and Sarah got into their car. because they were going from lunch at a restaurant back to their hotel. I got into my car. He got out of his car, came over to my car. He tapped on the window. I rolled it down. He said to me two things. He said, "By the way, there's a little

light on the dashboard. It's a red light. It's the brake light. It's telling me that the brakes may not work." The second thing he said was, "I'll follow you." And he did. Real close. "My brake light is on, and maybe my brakes won't work, and I'll follow you." Someone behind you and they cannot stop, and you become alert when you think that's a possibility. You look and you watch and you listen, and you wonder, will it happen?

Christmas is like that. Someone with the brake lights on and they're following us. Fred Craddick years ago was living in the middle of Iowa, and there was this little church out there in the middle of nowhere, and it pretty much had been closed. But one weekend a year it was open, and people came. That one weekend a year they fixed up the church and cleaned up the cemetery. They had a potluck dinner, and forty years ago, one day, someone asked Fred if he would preach on the Sunday when they met, and he said he would, and so he did. So people gathered for that weekend. The Saturday they worked, Sunday they all came back. There was a worship service and Fred preached, and then there was a potluck dinner. He said, "I don't know why I asked the question, but at the end of the service I said, "Why do you just meet one Sunday a year?" And they said, "Because we can't afford a full-time preacher." And he said to them, "Would you like to meet next Sunday? I'll be here." They said yes, and so they did. He preached again. "Would you like to meet the Sunday after that?" So three Sundays in a row, he met with them, and on the third Sunday, Fred said he baptized this twenty year old crippled woman, is what he said, and then he left and he never heard anything about what happened in the little church back there in the middle of Iowa. He got his PhD and he taught at Candler School of Theology, Emory University, you know, it's in Atlanta. Forty years later he retired. At his retirement party, they had invited all the new students to come in, it was September, and they introduced themselves, and one of them said that she was from Iowa. After the dinner, Fred walked up to her and said, "Where are you from in Iowa?" and she said, "Southwestern Iowa, in the middle of nowhere." Fred said, "Well, forty years ago I preached in that area, a little church in the middle of nowhere, and the last Sunday I was there I baptized this crippled woman, I think her name was Alice." The student got tears in her eyes, and she looked at Fred and said, "Alice is the reason I'm here." Bingo. Christmas, forty years later.

You never know what you're going to get from Christmas. A little boy comes in Christmas day and he sees a rocking horse under the tree and he names it George because it's his. Bingo. Christmas. Sixty-year-old woman, it's a dark night, after more pumpkin pies have been shoved into the stove, looks into the window and sees in the reflection from the window, she sees herself and then looks even closer, she sees her mother, who's been dead ten years. Bingo, Christmas. And a smile goes across her face. Then in a nursing home, sitting quiet in his room, thinking about when he was a boy, comes to terms with a sad childhood when all at once he begins to think about his dad, and his dad was so critical of him, and he just wondered if he was worth anything himself, you know, and he got to thinking about that, and he got to thinking about his dad, and maybe he did the best he could do, and perhaps it was that he was loved. Bingo, Christmas happened. All at once there's a way to forgive and not relive, and move on. All at once, the candle that they lighted at the church is the candle of faith. All at once, Christmas is not so much the unbelievable myth as it becomes the undeniable warmth that tells us, God is not a

distant and beyond our reach, but distinct and within a manger, or the heart. Bingo, Christmas comes. You may not even know where or when. It could happen when you think it will, it could happen any time between now and then, or it may take a year, or it may take fifty, before "bingo" Christmas comes. But it could happen sooner versus later, if we're prepared for it.

The second thing I want to say, I think the hardest job we have now, the only way Christmas will come, since we don't know where or when, is to be open to it. To expect it and to want for it. Did you see the sign on the building there at the Macy's parade? In New York City, the sign said "Believe." Most important word at Christmas is "Believe." Dare to believe. Believe in Christmas. Believe in yourself. Believe in each other. And the only way to prepare for it, you see, what you want from Christmas is faith that there is something very, very good coming. And it takes faith to believe that. Something very, very good is coming. Isaiah did his best to help the people understand that the Assyrians were on the march, ready to go on down into Jerusalem, and Isaiah said something very good is coming, it is the spirit of God, it is the spirit of might, it is the spirit of knowledge and love. It comes not to judge by what you see or by what you hear. It's a whole different standard, you know, and the wolf will dwell with the lamb and the calf and the lion together, and the little child will lead them.

Michelangelo said the greatest danger for most of us lies not in setting our aim too high and falling short, but in setting out dreams too low and attaining them. And Goethe said every morning cries to us, "Do what you ought. Trust what may be." This is a time to think big and dream high. A time to go for it, and to raise the bar of our hopes. To live a life where Christmas comes is to live as if. To live as if you're worth the trouble. To act as if the best is yet to be, and to reach out as if you get what you deserve. It's candy bars and pumpkin pie and gravy and turkey and it's a banquet and you're invited. Take what is good.

First meeting of the weight loss class, and the instructor holds up an apple in one hand and a candy bar in the other, and she says to the group, "Ladies, what are the attributes of this apple that are relevant to your diet?" and the answers came quick. "Well, you know, it's got lots of fiber in it, and not a lot of calories, and it tastes good, and it quells the appetite." She said "Yes, and there's one more thing about this apple." Holding up the candy bar, she said, "The apple's cheaper. You know, I paid seventy-five cents for this here candy bar," and there was a long pause, and from the back of the room, somebody said, "I'll give you a dollar for it." Pay the extra dollar. Walk the extra mile. God had done an amazing thing in this cameo appearance in the manger in Bethlehem. Calling us to extend ourselves in boldness. The best that's ever been was once an irrational thought of someone who almost didn't say it. Heroes are just ordinary people who catch on to an extraordinary hope and Christ will come when the extraordinary thought is thought by the ordinary thinkers, in ways that are creative. Christmas will come when we realize and expect the best, because that's what God wants for us, the best.

A couple of weeks ago I was invited with a group of people to be with John Fielder for dinner. Fielder's a photographer, you know. He's done several wonderful books of

pictures and Colorado scenes. Most famous is the book of pictures he took in honor of William Henry Jackson. In 1870, Jackson took these wonderful pictures of various places in Colorado. In the year 2000, Fielder went to the same places Jackson went, and took the same pictures, from the same place where Jackson took his pictures, over a hundred years before. A fascinating evening, listening to him talk about what he does and why he does it. He kept saying to us, "You know how lucky we are, to be alive, and be able to experience the wonders of nature and life on this great earth. And we need to take care of this earth," he said.

Just being around John Fielder, you got the idea there was something awesome and wonderful and positive and joyful. I wondered how he could be so positive. I figured he probably had such a charmed life, everything in his life just worked out really, really well. Then he told us something I and the others there will never forget. He said, "The year I took those pictures, the year I made that book in tribute to Jackson, that was the year 2000, when my wife, my 50-year-old wife was diagnosed with Alzheimers, and her memory began fading fast and she died that year. He said he had to try to hold his family together while he was taking those pictures and working on that project. And he said something I'll never forget, he said, "When you take a picture, what you do is to approach the scene and let the scene speak to you." And it seemed, listening to him, this was his whole approach to life, to live with a sense of respect for the privilege of being in the place. Take nothing for granted. Know that there's something good out there. Look for the good in the darkest time. Expect a miracle when it looks like there's nothing more. Take a chance that something new will happen, and watch as it unfolds, like the Word becoming flesh. Like a baby born in a manger. Like Bronco tickets.

Two Sundays ago a member of the church spoke to me as the 10:45 service was beginning. Two tickets to the Bronco game. Could I find someone to use them. You think about that, you know? It was never if I would do it, but how I could do it. I thought about putting it in the pastoral prayer. "God bless the Broncos, and the two members of our congregation who will take the two tickets I have." I thought about the announcement period. "We need two people to go to Denver at Vesco Mile High Stadium to convert sinners at the Bronco game. Who's willing to do that?" Since it was the same weekend as the All-church Auction, I thought about calling Greg to let the bidding begin. What would happen. I walked up to this couple after church. Her parents loved football. Her parents, both of them, have died this year. And they live in Denver, but they're up here cleaning out the house. You know how that goes. And I said to them, "You need to take these two tickets and go to the game today. You need to do that, and this is an order, it's not a choice." Well, they took them. I was never real sure if they went, but they took them, and this week they sent me an email. "We don't really follow football much. We'd never been to a Bronco game. God works in mysterious ways. I think God was telling us we're special. Wonderful seats at the Bronco game, and we got to see the game. We got there on time. It didn't fit into the schedule that we had, but we got there on time, and it was a terrific game to watch. The Broncos won. CSU Marching Band played. We love to watch marching bands. They guy sitting next to us took a picture. We were standing with the CSU marching band in the background." They sent the picture. "Thanks for asking us. We wouldn't have thought of taking them. We had a terrific time."

But you know, they had to be open to it. Bingo, Christmas. Something good is coming. It's going to come. We have to expect good from Christmas. Bingo. Good food to eat, good friends to meet. Good time with family. Good luck and faith. Good music to hear. So good. Peace on earth good. Maybe better than we deserve good. Bingo, Christmas. When the lion lies down with the calf, and the little child will lead us.

What do you want from Christmas? That's a different question than what do you want for Christmas. It's not about a new toy or a necktie. It's isn't socks or rocks or a bike or an Ipod. It isn't a video game or an HD3D television set. What do you want from Christmas?

A .J. Cronin found a moss-covered bench overlooking the harbor on the Channel Island of Jersey. A century ago, Victor Hugo was in exile. He wasn't feeling well. He was quite ill, in fact. He was persecuted by his own beloved country, France, and it was there that he would climb every evening and sit on that bench, gazing at the sunset, picking up before he left a pebble. Sometimes a big one, sometimes a little one, and throwing it into the water below. Children playing watched him do this and finally one day a little girl, more bold than the others, pushed herself forward. "Monsieur Hugo, why do you come here to throw those stones?" The great writer was silent and smiled gravely. He said, "Those are not stones, my child. I'm throwing self-pity into the sea."

Throwing self-pity away, and disappointment, and self-doubt, and failure, and shame. Throw the past. Let it be gone. And when Christmas comes, we will find it. It will find us, and the worst that was gives way to the best that can be. By the way, there's a car with its warning light on. We lead, they'll follow. Keep watching. And if we bring in the potted plants, watch out for the little green snake. And the child born somewhere, like Bethlehem, or in our hearts, bingo, Christmas.