

Sermon for 12-8-19
Scriptures: Isaiah 11:1-10 & Matthew 3:1-12
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Back in September, while driving somewhere, I heard an interesting little 2-minute piece on NPR about a tomato plant. An entire news segment about a single tomato, actually. Maybe you heard about this tomato -- it was covered in the *New York Times* and *People* magazine, among others.

New Yorker Matt Frey was out paddle-boarding on the East River -- that's the estuary that divides Manhattan from Queens and Brooklyn, with notoriously polluted waters. The sheer volume of sewage and industrial waste collected in the East River meant that for most of the 20th century, fish could not survive in it. Anyway, as Matt Frey was paddling through the not-so-sparkling waters by the Brooklyn Bridge, he saw a flash of bright red in the distance. He was intrigued, of course, so he headed that way.

What he found was a plump, beautiful, juicy-looking perfect red tomato, hanging from a healthy plant, growing atop a piling in the middle of the water (that's a round wooden pillar that sticks up about two feet above the water's surface). He snapped a picture, and it quickly went viral, because nobody could believe that a tomato plant could grow in the middle of the nasty East River.

The biologist on NPR said it wasn't a miracle, exactly... more like the awesome power of bird poop. A bird ate a tomato, maybe in New Jersey somewhere, then flew across the river and pooped out a seed right on top of that piling, and it took root and grew. Maybe a little bit of a miracle.

You're probably wondering: what on earth does the East River tomato have to do with Advent? What does this tomato have to do with Isaiah and John the Baptist? Fair questions.

We began a journey with Isaiah last Sunday. We heard how, in the time of the divided kingdoms, young Isaiah was called by God to preach faith and repentance to King Ahaz and the people of Judah, who were facing annihilation. We also heard about Isaiah's two-fold prophetic formula. Isaiah did not hesitate to speak

out against the injustice and faithlessness around him, but his prophecies never ended with condemnation.

This is Isaiah in a nutshell: harsh judgment and a call to repentance, and then glorious, perfect restoration. That's God's promise, and it's exactly the promise we need... because the truth is that our experience of restoration and wholeness and salvation is only as glorious as whatever we've passed through to get there.

This is not a modern development. What's true for us was true for Isaiah and his peers, and was true for Jesus and John the Baptist.

We know that Jesus and his cousin John were raised on a steady diet of Isaiah's words -- remember, it's the 61st chapter of Isaiah that Jesus reads to the crowd gathered in the synagogue on the occasion of his first public sermon:

*"The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."*ⁱ

"Today, this scripture [Isaiah's prophecy] has been fulfilled in your hearing."ⁱⁱ

And just look at John the Baptist! We're perfectly fine with his eccentricities, and his talk of repentance and preparing the way of the Lord, and we don't even mind when he calls the Pharisees and Sadducees a brood of vipers (because they're not us, after all)... But what about the parts of John's testimony that make us cringe and wiggle uncomfortably in our pews, the caustic, accusatory language about the ax lying at the root of the trees and the Messiah who will clear his threshing floor and burn the chaff with unquenchable fire?

This wild mountain man, John, the latest in a long line of great and faithful Hebrew prophets. His "clothing of camel hair with a leather belt around his waist"ⁱⁱⁱ sounds unique, but it's really a throwback to the prophet Elijah -- "A hairy man, with a leather belt around his waist" (that's in 2 Kings).^{iv}

And while John's clothing is Elijah's, his images and metaphors are straight out of Isaiah.

Listen to these verses from the 5th chapter of Isaiah -- 'The Song of the Unfruitful Vineyard':

"My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill...
{read 5:1b through 7}

The Lord tells Isaiah to go and prophesy, tell the people what will happen, help them understand that their systems of injustice and their selfish ways will not stand much longer, all sin will be cleared away. The final verse of chapter 6 is this: "Even if a tenth part remain in it, it will be burned again, like.. an oak whose stump remains standing when it is felled. The holy seed is its stump."^v

The holy seed is its stump...

There's more, much more of this prophecy about destruction that cleanses, that prunes away evil and leaves only a seed, a stump, a pure and holy remnant that represents all God needs to bring restoration and salvation to the earth. And John the Baptist, with his Elijah clothing and his Isaiah prophecy, is laying it all out for us to understand -- John is the one preparing the way, and his cousin, Jesus of Nazareth, is the Messiah, the promised branch growing forth from the stump of Jesse (in other words, from the line of King David).

If these two-fold prophecies -- the ones that unsettle us and then refresh us, the painful endings that become holy beginnings -- if these are so vital in God's unfolding story, and so much a part of our spiritual DNA... what does that tell us about ourselves?

Why are we so afraid of the axe and the winnowing fork, and even the "unquenchable fire"^{vi}? If we just look around with eyes of faith, we can see that God breathes new life into ashes. Whether it's a branch growing out of the stump of Jesse, or a single red tomato growing on a piling in the middle of the East River, our God makes new things grow, when and where we least expect it. God can always raise up that which has been cut down!

And God's unquenchable fire is not something to be feared or avoided; it's the purifying, refining, sanctifying presence of our Creator in our lives... think of Moses and the burning bush, or the pillar of fire guiding God's people through the exodus, or the salvation of Shadrach & Meshach & Abednego in the fiery furnace.

That chaff, which John says the Messiah will gather and burn, is the husk -- the hard, protective shell around each grain of wheat. Our chaff is our shells, the nonsense of this world that we've bought into, the heavy armor we put on to get through our days, everything in us that works against goodness and love and compassion and mercy. Our chaff is what gets in between us and God.

So what should we prune in ourselves, and in our lifestyles? What should we let go, and lay before Christ's unquenchable fire? What might sprout up, what might be reborn? What might God be doing in us and through us and with us, right now?

Can we hear this -- you and me -- can we hear this as exactly the guidance we need to hear, at exactly this moment in our lives? Can we listen to the prophet's words, instead of arguing or resisting, and trust in God's irrepressible creativity? Can we give up our fear and our illusions of control and look to God for our salvation?

This is Advent. It's time for preparing, examining, winnowing, repenting, and refining. Thanks be to God, we don't have to do it alone. **Amen.**

ⁱ Isaiah 61:1-2a

ⁱⁱ Luke 4:21

ⁱⁱⁱ Matthew 3:4

^{iv} 2 Kings 1:8

^v Isaiah 6:13

^{vi} Matthew 3:12