

“Roots, Shoots, Fruits,”

Sermon Preached by Rev. Carol Reynolds
December 5, 2010

Isaiah 11:1-10, Matthew 3:1-12

First Congregational Church, UCC, Cadillac, MI
For Private Distribution Only

You may recall that we visited a bit of today's Old Testament text with the kids a few weeks back through one of Edward Hicks' many "Peaceable Kingdom" paintings. They responded incredulously, with *appropriate*, if highly animated, skepticism, to the sight of a wolf and a lamb lying down together and a child petting a lounging leopard. A more modern rendition comprised of a dog, a cat, a bird, and a butterfly *really* drove the point home. "Hey, that's a food chain!" some of the older kids observed. Yes, indeed. ...The whole scene seemed more than a little unnatural to them. Never mind that such harmony was our earliest roots, if only for a brief time...and is our **destination** in the realm God has dreamt for us.

With more than a few Advents and Christmases under our belts, we adults may well have a similarly disbelieving reaction not only to Isaiah's Utopian images, but to the whole idea of Advent waiting and hope. As we're dutifully packing our liquids in quart-size plastic bags and being subjected to more and more invasive travel inspections, the idea of ever living peaceably with our neighbors may seem pretty remote. As we watch the deadlock in our own government grow while thousands stand to lose their very last stream of income and quite possibly their homes, as we observe our rivals North Korea and Iran becoming greater and greater nuclear threats, and life in impoverished Haiti growing increasingly treacherous, we may wonder what difference Jesus' coming has made in our world... Is it any wonder that we distract ourselves with a watered-down, commercialized version of the Christmas story and start the ads rolling even before Thanksgiving? We have settled for abnormal for so long, practically our whole

history, that we don't always recognize the possibility for **God's normal**, a "**new normal**," breaking through into the world.

Yet Isaiah tells us that a branch, a vital green shoot, will grow out of a root, a stump, a remnant, of God's people. You see, God is the original recycler. Our own Ms. Green follows **God's** lead. And every one of us, as individual Christians and a church community, has a role to play in God's grand, redemptive, recycling project.

What are this *particular congregation's* roots? As you probably know and Pat Porter has carefully documented, this church was once home to Cadillac's doctors and lawyers and wealthy merchants. Many streets around town are named for First Congregational's prominent past members. That is not who we are today, but neither are we a stump. Not by a long shot. No, as our recent visioning session and every time we gather attests, we still have **much**—and perhaps even **more**--to celebrate: We are warm and welcoming, generous and accepting. We possess abundant gifts from music to hospitality to crafts to administration and building maintenance to painting, pottery, and poetry. We are curious and intellectual, progressive forward thinkers. We are educators, community activists, healers, and athletes. We are trailblazers and missionaries in the best sense of the word, that is, witnesses and perpetrators of social justice. Quite a shoot, don't you think? Quite a light to shine in the darkness of a hurting world and local region.

Now don't get me wrong. This isn't about bragging or tooting our own horns. It's about identifying and having gratitude for the ways in which **God** has blessed us. And then carefully **listening, watching, and waiting** for the ways in which those gifts might be used to **bear fruit** on behalf of that peaceable kingdom God has in mind for us all. Actively pursuing leads, as well

as letting opportunities land gently in our laps, take shape and then flight like beautiful, redemptive butterflies. When we set our hearts on such things, often, it seems, they multiply and take on lives of their own. Gifts and needs unfold and converge, generate energy and propel us forward, a little closer to God's realm. **That** is why we are here.

Now this all may sound a tad more optimistic than Matthew's John the Baptist has given us permission to be. But I learned something interesting about the translation this week that puts a different spin on things. The image of Jesus with a winnowing fork separating human wheat from chaff and tossing the chaff into unquenchable fire is a horrific one, isn't it? Isn't the pitchfork the **devil's** tool of choice? Well, here's the thing I learned. The Greek word for that tool, *ptuon*, is not a "winnowing **fork**," as most English translations have it, but a winnowing **shovel**. A shovel does not **separate** but **gathers** already separated wheat and chaff from the threshing floor, putting the wheat into the granary to be stored and the chaff into the fire to be destroyed. Thus, those who receive John's baptism get to be wheat and will receive the Holy Spirit, while those who don't receive John's baptism, regardless of their pedigree, are chaff, and will be destroyed in fire. John spent his life teaching and baptizing to distinguish wheat from chaff, and he expected that Jesus would be dealing out blessings and punishments accordingly. But John only had it half right: Jesus came to **bless** -- to heal the blind and the lame, to bring lepers back into the community, to bring life to the dead and good news to the poor. Those who were expecting the outcast to be gathered in for blessing found their hopes more than fulfilled; But those eagerly anticipating the destruction of the wicked would be scandalized by Jesus' behavior. Now Matthew does use imagery from time to time that would seem to support John's vision that there's **an in-crowd and an out-crowd**, but he undermines it at least as often. In that sense, Matthew reflects a tension in our tradition. Like Isaiah, Matthew's passion for God's

justice inspires harsh words for those who reject God's prophets and oppress the outcast, but also holds to a vision of all nations streaming into Zion, of the day when "the glory of God will be revealed, and all people shall see it together." (Isaiah 40:5)

Perhaps the difficulty of trying to figure out just who's in and who's out arises because **God's love is a circle expanding faster than any person or community can chart**. So why not **throw out** the graph paper? John the Baptist took a radical step in baptizing **all** who came to him in the desert. But then he found himself outpaced by Jesus, who **came to the people** instead of waiting for them to come to him, who showered the blessings of the Holy Spirit and offered fellowship to any who would accept them, and taught his disciples to do the same, going to people of every nation (Mt 28:18-20).

During Advent, we look for the fulfillment of that work. And if we watch and listen closely enough we will see that God's kingdom **is** in fact breaking through, that the circle is growing wider and wider now, and now, and now... And that **our own** small congregation is sometimes the agent of that widening through which God breaks through in the world.

It's a good thing that God gives us strength to mount up with wings like eagles (Isaiah 40:31), because God's Spirit is moving faster, going so far ahead of us that sometimes we can just barely perceive God's presence and God's movement. We **all** are in need of conversion, not once, but day by day and hour by hour--and not to try to make God love us--but so we can come closer to perceiving the breadth and height and depth of God's love – and then it gets broader, and higher, and deeper, always surprising, always moving ahead. Beckoning us to follow and let a healthy shoot grow from whatever roots we claim. Challenging us to let our lights shine and bear

fruit on behalf of God's realm by broadening our own circle of love and care. To open our hearts to the baby Jesus whom we are expecting...and to the Christ in people we weren't necessarily anticipating. If a brash, desert-dwelling, insect-eating guy like John the Baptist could point so many people toward acceptance, healing, and redemption in Jesus, imagine what our community might have the capacity to do!

May we continue to vision and dream, wait, anticipate, speak and act. May we be the change we seek this Advent 2010 and beyond.

Amen.