

**“Telling the Truth, and Bearing Fruit” based on Isaiah 11:1-10 and Matthew 3:1-12
Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione, December 4, 2022, Shelby Presbyterian Church**

While in Seminary, Claire and I had the good fortune of going to Paris for two whole weeks. We traded our apartment in Princeton for a friend of a friend’s apartment there. It was a good deal. At the time, this was an especially big deal for us because we were new parents. Harrison was just five months old – and we didn’t have a travel routine yet, or if we have yet.

We brought everything we could pack in one bag each, and everything the airline said we could take with allowances for kids – stroller, car seat, sure. By the time we checked the baggage and stowed away our carry-ons and sat down for our overnight flight to Paris, we were exhausted.

Then we found out that the seat we thought we had reserved because it had a bassinet option for Harrison was not a bassinet seat. We were in the middle, and there was no bassinet option, since there was barely enough space for Claire and I, let alone a child also in a bassinet.

For a while, the third seat was tantalizingly empty, and it seemed a miracle. That is, until a large man, about my size, but a little bit taller, sat down. He was dressed in an all-black suit with a white shirt, a black hat, with a beard and curly hair coming down from his temples. Immediately, it was easy to identify this man’s faith. He was Jewish, most likely in the Hassidic tradition.

Now even more cramped, the nerd that I am, I got excited – I had just passed biblical Hebrew, and now, here I was, next to a man reading a newspaper in modern Hebrew. Now, for comparison, basically, imagine someone who barely reads English, looking over someone’s shoulder to read Beowulf in Old English. And then, thinking, ever so confidently, they could somehow figure it out. Soon enough, he caught me, and he seemed excited too.

He graciously tried to speak English to me, “You know Hebrew?” he asked. To which I responded confidently, ‘Fatone.’ I was so proud, but he looked confused. So, I made a hand motion, and said again, “Fatone.” He was no less confused, and I said “little, Fatone, little, Fatone.” Still, I got louder and louder. Then, I gave up and said, “No.” and shook my head. My adventure in speaking Hebrew ended. As you might have realized, there is no word, “Fatone,” in Hebrew. A little while later, after he moved to an empty seat, it came to me. The word I wanted to say to him was “qatone,” an actual Hebrew word meaning, “small, insignificant.”

How did this happen? Some of you out there likely remember the 1990s boyband NSYNC, and now I’m guessing some of you might know where I’m going with this already. I was not a fan, but NSYNC was everywhere when I was in college, and one of the members of the band was named Joey – Joey Fatone. So then, my trick for remembering the meaning of “qatone,” was to insult the boyband singer named Joey Fatone, by calling him small and insignificant.

So, there I was, trying to build a bridge with this Orthodox Jewish man, and he asks if I speak Hebrew, to which I nod and say the name of a boyband singer. Not only that, I was growing louder and more demonstrative as I butchered his language, repeating the name of a boyband singer, “Fatone, Fatone,” over and over again.

And so, as I was translating the passage from Isaiah, I chuckled a bit, when I got to the verse about a “little child shall lead them.” The word usually translated “little,” is in fact, “qatone.” It is the word for “small and insignificant.” What’s more the word translated as child is the word for a servant child.

These words are important for understanding both the Isaiah and Matthew texts together. You see, in the early church, Isaiah was perhaps the most beloved and quoted scripture. It is a book of hope and of promise, and a vision for the world as it should be. Isaiah is filled with biblical poetry and moves in three major sections – one with a message pre-exile to give hope in a crumbling nation of Judah, another is a message from exile about the suffering servant who would redeem the people, and the third is a vision of a redeemed Israel and world.

Our reading from Isaiah is from the first section and in Matthew, we see a quote from the second one. And so, in our reading from Isaiah, we get a prediction of a shoot from the root of Jesse, who will be a righteous judge, and then we get a new metaphor to consider – a world where wolves are immigrants living peacefully with the lamb, and where a leopard doesn’t hunt, but lays down with a goat. A world where among the offspring of these predators and prey, a small, insignificant child will lead them. Lions and cattle will eat straw.

Let’s be clear, this is biblical poetry, and these are metaphors that carry deeper meanings. So, I do not think this is a prediction of grass-fed lions, but of the Kings and rulers sharing the same meal as their subjects, no longer preying on them. It is metaphor of cunning animals moving into a grazing pasture of sheep, and instead of feasting, they sojourn or dwell peacefully there. And the child who leads, is not what the world might revere, but a small, insignificant, servant child, an image that fits with the second part of Isaiah, where the suffering servant is described as not much to look at.

There’s much common language throughout Isaiah and Matthew recognizes it in his gospel. Like the other gospels, the evangelist quotes from the 2nd part of Isaiah, our chapter 40, and he puts John the Baptizer in context here as Isaiah’s voice in the wilderness proclaiming, “Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths.” John is offering a ritual cleansing of baptism to repent of sins, and at the shores of the Jordan, some Pharisees and Sadducees, not only show up to observe but come seeking baptism.

And what does John do? He insults them. He calls them a “Brood of Vipers,” a “generation of venomous snakes.” What’s more, vipers don’t lay eggs like other snakes and reptiles, but are born alive. So, this insult carried with it the mistaken belief that baby vipers ate their mothers from the inside to come out.

Yet, I don’t think Matthew believes this is entirely an insult here, because John, like Matthew, likely knows Isaiah very well and knows the Messianic metaphors we read today. And so, he knows that in the presence of the one he prepares the way for, the venomous cobra is of no concern to the nursing child and the older child may even put their hand in a viper’s den. In the metaphor of Isaiah 11, even the snakes are peaceful.

And so, this is what John wants from the Pharisees and Sadducees who seek baptism – They are not to just come for baptism hoping to avoid punishment for their sins, and they are not just to repent in words, but to bear fruit worthy of repentance and which shows they have changed. The point is not to just do the outward shows of repentance, and then fall back on the fact that they are the chosen people, since God could turn stones into people and choose them.

No, John says that his is a water baptism of repentance, but Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire, and this will burn away our sinfulness, remove our chaff from our wheat, preserving only the kernel, of who God made us to be.

Notice that the chaff and the wheat are from the same stalk, this is not an us versus them. And the trees that are felled are not necessarily individual people, but the institutions of this world. Each grain of wheat has the chaff and the kernel, it is not two types of wheat stalk. This is not about burning up or chopping down the evil people and saving the good people. It's about burning away what is evil inside us so only the good remains, and Jesus knocking over the structures of culture that no longer bear fruit.

By this we will produce good fruit, the fruit of the Kingdom. The good news of the gospel is not a dualistic view of the world as good guys versus bad guys, but a recognition that the only one who is good, came down to share in our humanity, and lived as we live, being born as a small, insignificant, a servant child in Bethlehem. And this child shows us who God is and how we are to live, even dying for us, on a cross used for slaves and rebels, and then rising again, so that in us, his blood might wash us, burn away the chaff, and bear fruit through us.

The metaphors of predators and prey living side by side are a vision of the Kingdom of God. Preparing the way of the Lord is not merely a show of sorrow for others to see, but it is the decision to tell the truth – that's what confess means – about our sin, and lay down our excuses. We need to stop trying to justify ourselves, by our own standards and the world's. When we tell the truth in this way, we humble ourselves, and open ourselves to the change that God wants in us, then we will bear fruit that shares God's love.

My sisters and brothers, you are God's own beloved, and the proof is in Jesus, who did not regard equality with God as something to exploit, but humbled himself, sharing in our flesh to listen in obedience to both God and what it is to be human. This is what he does even to the point of being born a helpless baby laid in the animal's manger, and even to the point of being hanged on that cross for our sins. In Christ, the Son of God came down to us first as an insignificant child, and he died for us and rose for us, in humility and love.

We must be willing to come down as well, to lay down the things we think make us better than other people. We need to reject the idea of "us" versus "them." After all, our God who is holy, distinct, different and the ultimate other compared to us, became like us who are sinful. God tore away the divide between God and us by sharing in our humanity so that we might share in God's life. That's what Christmas is all about.

Know that you are loved, and prepare the way of the Lord, breaking down the mountains, and filling in the valleys, so that all might walk the same ground to our God's love. This is the fruit,

which was so hard for the Pharisees and Sadducees to bear, as they sought power to defeat their enemies and preserve their life and institutions. This is fruit that is so hard for all of us to bear still in our world today. It is the fruit of humility, gentleness, patience, and love. It is laying down our desire for power and trusting God's love for us. Knowing we are loved, we are called to love others, especially those who are different from us and even those who might be enemies. In the end, what God wants from us is to know we are loved and show them this love, so that all might know they are also loved by the God who made them. Amen.