Sermon on Advent 2 2019
(Isaiah 11:1-10; Romans 15:4-13; Matthew 3:1-12)

“His delight will be in the fear of the Lord.” Delight and fear. It’s one of those strange associations that we don’t think about, at least those of us who’ve heard language like this all our church-going lives.

But even so, take a second: delight is something we associate with pleasure, beauty, feeling good, after receiving a compliment, while reading a good book, while talking on the phone with an old friend.

Fear is associated with the opposite of all of that: pain, fracture, rottenness, feeling bad, being judged, punishment. Delight is not something we associate with fear, even that really strange phrase, the fear of the Lord.

But it gets even stranger, the Hebrew word translated as delight, in this first reading, is the word for “smell.” The translators have made the determination that “smell” in this context must be a metaphor, you wouldn’t actually say, “His smell will be in the fear of the Lord” so they translate “His delight.”

This makes sense because Isaiah was written when worship was a visceral experience; the bahing of sheep, the slaughter of the same, the smell of lamb burnt on the altar; these were all things Israelites were familiar with; God had a smell!

The sense of smell is not something Westerners associate with worship, although I’m betting, if you’re relatively new to Church you associate a particular smell with an old Anglican Church made of wood; I know when I started attending one, I did!

It seems strange to us, but there are cultures where people stand at the door of churches and smell people, refusing them admission on the grounds that they carry with them the scent of evil.

We know that animals are good at this and apparently even humans can “smell” pheromones given off in the sweat of people who are afraid, apparently sayings like “the smell of fear filled the room” are based on some kind of reality.

Of course, the point of this surprising comment in Isaiah is that the Messiah, when he comes will judge with fine-honed accuracy. Like a master chef who can lean over a simmering pot of soup and discern if it needs just a pinch more of this or that, the Messiah will never exercise judgement in a blunt sort of way but with exquisite fairness.

A person’s appearance might deceive us; a person’s words can seduce us but the Messiah’s justice will be based on that delicate smell, that delightful smell “the fear of the Lord.”

Given the mashup of words we can tell that this notoriously difficult concept is not the fear that grips our hearts when we get a phone call from the police in the middle of the night or when a wild animal is chasing us.

But rather a concept that somehow manages to cobble together: submitting to a God who is characterized by faithful love; alongside the flourishing life, alongside helping others experience it to.

It’s that awesome sense of delight and fulfillment when you know *this is it*, this is what you signed up for, this is the kind of thing, the type of life that is right at the heart of human destiny and you, liddle ‘ol you, have been included!

This is the awesome invitation that the *Messiah* will know and will exercise on behalf of all. This is the kind of delight, by its sheer nuance, by its integrity, it’s gentleness that will create equity.

There is talk of slaying the wicked with breath, but unless you’re talking about my breath in the morning after I’ve eaten a lot of garlic, breath doesn’t kill; in this case it’s a metaphor of exposure, the wicked will topple when they’ve been exposed for who they really are.

Isaiah’s prophetic vision is an awesome one but not a settled one, it’s about a Peace that is on the way Justice,

the Justice of the Messiah is a dynamic concept and that’s because, as the last verses make clear, the kind of Peace that is on its way to justice is exercised by the Messiah’s people, “*they* will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain.” Last time I checked, we’re not there yet!

Now comes the hard part, talk of wolves lying down with lambs is one thing, building a worldwide community from every language, tribe, worldview and culture is quite another, but that is what Paul has in view in our second reading.

May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus

The harmony—literally my favourite word because of difference in unity—of Jews and Gentiles doing the hard work of fulfilling promises that were originally made to Israel but are now to be applied to all times and places.

Indeed, we could even say, for this theme is also prevalent in Isaiah (remember the wolves and lambs!) and in Paul, the work of the Messiah through his people’s harmony so that it comes to bear on all creation.

If Peace is not a state of being but a journey towards justice, this justice applies to all and to *everything*.

Which sets us up for our text from Matthew and the stark words of the Baptist. Sometimes we just want to hear the vision, read the scriptures but not admit that they actually require us to do anything, that somehow they apply to other people out there, but not to me!

That’s why God sends prophets like John the Baptist and Greta Thunberg.

One of my sons sent me a YouTube video of a few climate change activists collaborating with indigenous leaders in the Amazon jungle, that place that is now the center of the earth, middle earth in the fight to keep the lungs of our planet alive.

He asked, “so Dad, shouldn’t the church be doing something about this?” At first I wanted to send him back a defensive email about how much the church is doing but then I sent him a note that said, “You’re my John the Baptist this Advent, thanks for challenging me to do more than pat myself on the back for the little I am doing.”

I need to have him challenge me with the clear tones of a prophet, “you’re not moving towards justice, the Peace that fosters justice for all and everything the way you can, the way we all need you to be.” In John’s words, “bear fruit worthy of repentance.”

Maybe I can be the same spur to you, maybe together we can “prepare the way” the way that God has already prepared for us.

Environmental activists and scholars tell us that if we work alongside women in the 2/3 world as well as alongside indigenous people we disproportionately reduce suffering, poverty, create more equity and mitigate climate change.

This because women are often the guts of the economy and the social engineers of much of our human world and because indigenous people have understood how to live with nature for thousands of years in a give-and-take kind of way.

So, we are not yet fostering the kind of Peace that leads to justice in the way we can as a people; what if we take one step together this Advent: I propose taking the money you’d spend on one medium sized Christmas present and donating it to a project that empowers women or indigenous people on the PWRDF website. <https://pwrdf.org/our-work-impact/>

Peace is not feeling peaceful, Peace is the journey towards justice, a journey that is beautiful because of the nuanced, inclusive judgements of our Messiah. This kind of Peace is our privilege, our delight, something that when we’re participating in it fills us, as Paul says, “with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”